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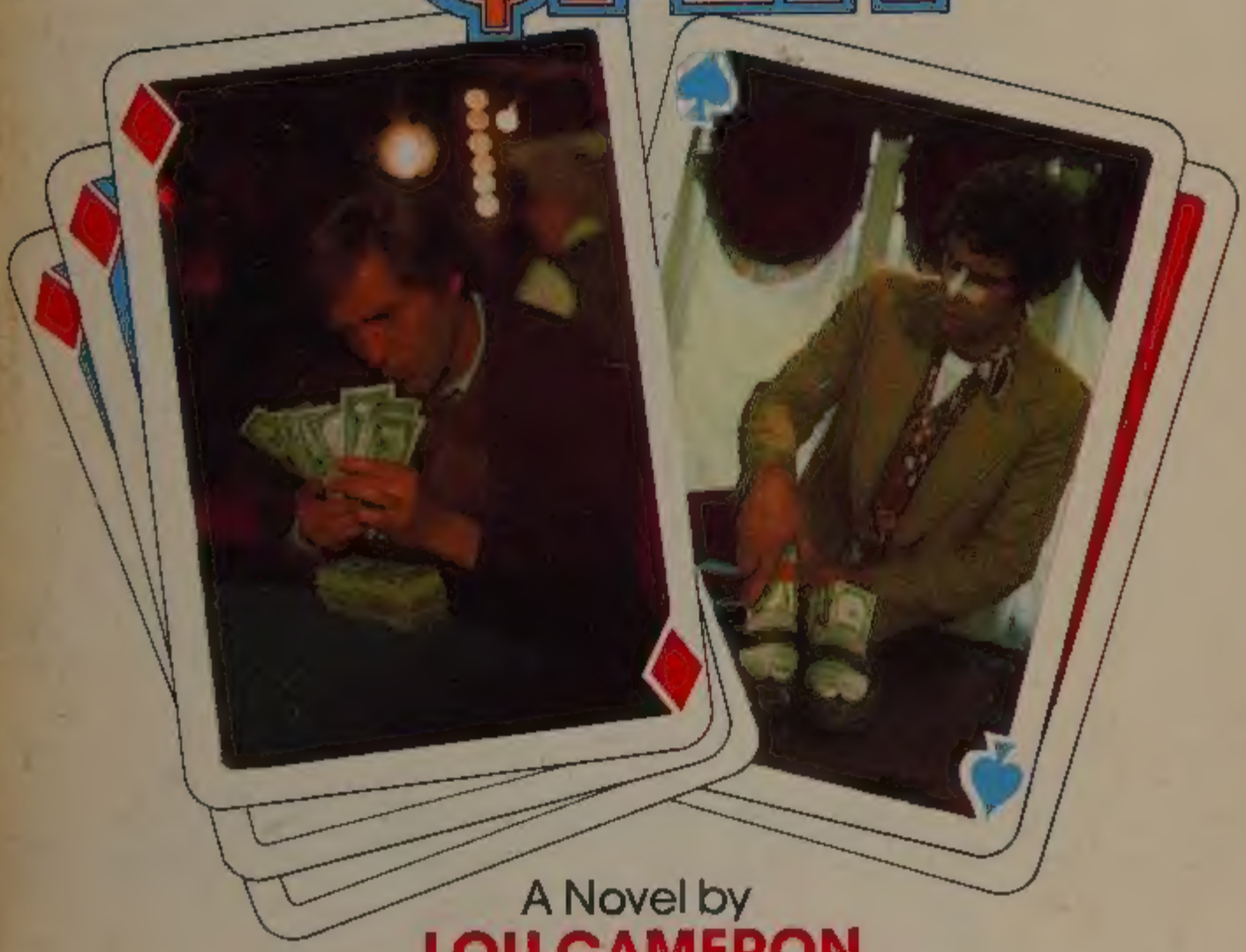

A Novel by

LOU CAMERON

Based on the screenplay by Joseph Walsh

...the story of two gambling men who discover something called a 'winning streak'

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COLUMBIA PICTURES

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A SPELLING/GOLDBERG PRODUCTION

of

A ROBERT ALTMAN FILM

GEORGE SEGAL

ELLIOTT GOULD

in

CALIFORNIA SPLIT

Screenplay by JOSEPH WALSH

Produced by ROBERT ALTMAN and JOSEPH WALSH

Directed by ROBERT ALTMAN

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The Big Red Ball

California Split

Lou Cameron

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1

Gardena, California, 1974 . . . It was quiet in the club at this hour. You couldn't tell what time it was. The management saw to that by having neither windows nor a clock on the wall to tell you what was going on in the real world outside. But it had to be getting late. The club was still crowded. It was always crowded. But the crowd at this hour was quiet. The yahoos and tourists had drifted off to wherever yahoos drift in the wee small hours, and the club had reverted to the regulars who took their gambling seriously.

The miniskirted waitresses moved on silent feet between the crowded tables, serving anything from a beer to a full-course meal to the blank-faced people who never left the tables this side of a ruptured bladder or cardiac arrest. There were no whores hanging on the bar in this club. The house men saw to that. They ran a clean, simple estab-

lishment that was devoted to one thing and one thing only. The Big G was devoted entirely to the business of serious gambling by serious gamblers. It was a place where you could win or lose, quietly, and the owners didn't give a shit either way. Yeah, the Big G was a good place to try your luck . . . sucker!

Something was missing. Something was wrong. Something was asking Bill Denny, "What the fuck are we *doing* here?," and Bill Denny had no answer.

He studied his cards again. They hadn't changed. He had a good hand and had *said* he was standing pat, for Chrissake. So what was bugging him? What did he want? What *could* he want? He was ahead, tonight, for a fucking change. He hadn't won any real bread. But he hadn't been losing any either. It was coming his way a slice at a time and, Inshallah, he'd wind up with enough to pay off Spark. It was sort of important to pay off guys like Spark. He didn't really take that remark about a broken arm too seriously. But he was into Spark enough to consider an unlisted phone for a while. It was hard to get any sack time with a pissed-off bookmaker calling at all hours and . . . .

"Seven rough," growled a harsh voice across the table, and Denny looked up to see the guy called Lew had spread his hand on the table. It was a good hand. Seven, six, five, deuce, and ace. So the prick won this time. So what? Denny was still ahead with more chips in his pile than when he'd started, and it was his deal coming up.

The younger guy they called Charlie said, "I didn't think you were that good," as Lew started to rake in the pot. Then Charlie added, "Wait a minute, what are you doing?"

Lew said, "You said it was good, didn't you?"

Charlie laughed, a taunting, nasty laugh, and sneered, "I only said I didn't think you were *that* good. Read 'em and weep!"

Then he spread a smoother seven, seven, *five*, four, deuce, and an ace!

Denny smiled wryly as he watched Charlie take the pot with a casual smirk. The guy called Lew was doing a piss-poor job at concealing his rage. What Charlie had done wasn't illegal. But it was pretty shitty. The unwritten rule among poker players is that you don't rub salt into the wound of a losing hand. Charlie was the only other player who'd stayed ahead in this game, and he was being obnoxious as hell about it.

Not that Denny blamed him, when it came to Lew. Lew was a big, dark guy who smelled of cheap cologne and expensive cigars, and none of the other players liked him. Aside from Charlie and Bill Denny, he'd been doing a bit better than the others, so far.

Lew said, "Come on, deal the damn cards," and Denny began to shuffle with deliberate care as he studied the others at the table.

There were six men and two women at the table. Only one of the women interested Bill Denny. Not that he wanted to get in her pants. She was over the hill in that department. Denny only wanted to know why she never looked up from the smallish

pile of chips she kept counting, over and over again, like a child playing with a crib toy.

"Come on, already. Deal," muttered Lew.

Denny riffled the pack, watching for the telltale jump in pattern of a marked deck.

He didn't think the deck was marked. Lew and Charlie looked like guys who took their game seriously. But he wouldn't be this far ahead if there'd been a mechanic in the game. He was only taking his time because it needled Lew. It was funny how easy it was to get in the habit as soon as you met the son of a bitch.

Charlie had started it, a couple of hands ago. Now, aside from the woman who counted her chips all the time, the others had picked it up from Charlie, and Lew was getting the idea that he had no friends in the game.

Lew was right. He was not the sort of guy who made friends easy. He was a loud, tinhorn bully with a chip on his shoulder and the manners of a storm trooper. He'd bumped Bill Denny a time too many and spilled cigar ash on the woman sitting next to him. Denny would deal when he felt good and ready.

Denny riffled the deck, and Lew exploded, "Come *on*, dammit! We're paying the fucking house by the hour!"

Denny smiled quietly and glanced around at the others. The guy called Charlie smiled back, and one of the other players shot him a knowing wink. They all knew what he was doing and seemed to be enjoying it.

Denny riffled another time and began to deal. He dealt with the smooth hand-motions of a man who's played some poker in his time. As the others took their cards, Denny saw the action pick up. He dealt eight hands, and the blood began to flow.

Some bet, some raised. By the time the pot was worth talking about, there were only five of them in the game. Charlie, the sullen Lew, the woman who counted chips, and a sad, chain-smoking man whose eyes were half closed against the smoke cloud he lived behind, waited to see what awful surprise Lady Luck, or Denny, had left in the deck.

Lew rapped pat. He did it too loudly, keeping his image of boyish charm intact. The chain-smoker asked for another card.

Denny peeled off the top card, slid it under a chip, and dealt the next to the chain-smoker. The woman who counted her chips stopped counting them long enough to murmur, "One, please."

That left Charlie. He stared thoughtfully at Lew and said, "You're pat, huh? Hmmm. That's verrry interesting. Took three raises and rapped pat. Hmmmm. You *were* pat, weren't you?"

The other woman, who'd dropped out, said, "Hey, come on. You know he was pat. We're paying six dollars an hour for this table!"

Charlie smiled boyishly and said, "Sorry, lady. I got a big decision here."

The woman muttered, "Big decision. Big decision. Every hand's a big decision! Why don't I just give all my money to the damned house and let them decide?"

Ignoring her, Charlie smiled gamely at Lew and said, "I don't think a rough nine is going to do me much good. All right. I'll let you break me down. Dealer, give me two."

Bill Denny shrugged and sent two cards skimming across the table. One of them accidentally hit a chip and cartwheeled off the table. It looked like it was going out of play until Charlie somehow managed to grab it with a catlike motion. A serious cardplayer is superstitious about a card that almost gets away. So Charlie glanced immediately at it. Even though his expression was guarded, Denny read it. Charlie seemed to like that card. He seemed to like it a lot.

Lew had played before, too. He said, "Hold it! That card's *dead*, dammit!"

Charlie smiled and asked, "What are you talking about?"

"That last card went off the table. It's a dead card. You gotta take another one. That's the rule in this game, chump."

Charlie's grin turned wolfish as he said, "My congratulations on your knowledge of the rules, chief. Only, the card never left the table."

Lew turned to the woman beside him and asked, "Didn't you see that damn card go off the table, lady?"

The woman looked up blankly from her small pile of chips and said, "What? I'm afraid I wasn't watching."

"Yeah," Lew growled, "You was busy counting them dumb chips. Any of you others see it?"

There was no answer.

Lew glanced up at the woman who'd dropped out and insisted, "*You* musta seen it. You don't have no cards in your hand. You must have seen the deal!"

The woman swore and replied, "All I see is that we're wasting six dollars an hour and I'm behind, dammit!"

Then she turned and shrilled, "Kenny! Kenny, come over and settle this for us, will you?"

A wary-eyed house man, walking on the balls of his feet, came over to the table with a noncommittal smile on his face. He looked like a tired cop responding to a domestic situation.

The woman who'd called him said, "Kenny, this is ridiculous. Put me at another table, will you? These jerks are acting like schoolboys playing marbles for keeps."

The house man called Kenny sighed and asked, "What's the problem?"

Lew twisted in his seat and snapped, "The problem is a card went off the table."

"That's a dead card," shrugged Kenny, in a bored tone.

"Yeah, but this punk won't give it up," said Lew.

Charlie smiled up at the house man and said, "There's nothing to give up because the card never *left* the table. I stopped it before it could."

Lew snapped, "It went a foot off the table, dammit!"

In a conversational tone, Charlie replied, "You're so full of shit it's amazing."

Lew started to rise and the house man sighed, "Hold it. *Hold* it! Any you others see this card go off the table?"

The woman counting her chips shook her head.

The chain-smoker shrugged and didn't answer.

Before Lew could start another round of abuse, Kenny stared thoughtfully at Bill Denny and said, "You were dealing, friend. If you dealt the card, you must have seen where it went."

A small voice sighed, "What the fuck are you *doing* here?" Then Bill Denny realized that the small voice was coming from inside his skull as he tried to think of an answer that would leave him uninvolved.

He didn't like Lew. But he didn't know Charlie and owed him no bond of blood-brotherhood, either. Why the fuck should *he* be caught in the middle like this?

Lew cut in with, "Come on, buddy. You saw the goddam card go off the table. Why are you covering for this creep? He your asshole buddy or something?"

That did it. Aloud, Denny said, "I dealt the man two cards. One hit a chip and bounced. He caught it. Over and out."

Kenny asked, "He catch it above the table?"

Denny nodded and the house man said, "Okay, that settles it, folks. The card plays. That's my ruling. You still want another table, Miriam?"

The woman who'd called him said, "I'll stay, if only they'll play, for God's sake!"

Lew protested, "Look *here*, dammit! I don't have to stand for this shit!"

Kenny smiled, grimly, and nodded as he replied, "That's right, friend. You don't have to stand for anything here. There's no lock on the front door, and you can pick up your dollies and go home any time you feel like it."

"I tell you, that card was off the table!"

"And I tell you I just made a ruling, friend. So, play poker or take a walk. It don't matter one way or the other to the house. And the house just made its ruling, you dig?"

Before Lew could answer, Kenny walked away to settle another dispute at another table. Charlie shot a look of thanks at Bill Denny. But Denny didn't acknowledge it. He'd done his own thing for his own reasons, which weren't all that clear, even to Denny.

The woman who'd called the house man told Lew, "So play if you're going to and let me back in the game, for God's sake!"

Lew hesitated before he muttered, "Twenty," and slid his chips into the pot.

The chain-smoker sighed and said, "Fold," throwing down his hand.

The woman who counted chips murmured, "I'll call, please."

That left it up to Charlie.

Charlie studied his hand and mused, "A bet and a call, huh? That card off the table didn't seem to worry you as much as I thought, from the way you cried about it!"

The woman who'd called Kenny rolled her eyes heavenward and signed, "Oh, Sweet Santa Bar-

ranza! Do we have to have another production number?"

Charlie laughed and said, "I raise."

"I raise, too," snapped Lew defiantly. Then he turned to the mousy little chip-counting woman and added, "How about it? It's forty to you, if you're still in!"

The woman dithered with her chips, sighed, "Oh, dear. All right, I call."

Charlie's voice was dead flat as he said, "Raise!"

The mockery was missing from his tone now, and Denny knew the game was getting serious.

The woman sighed, "Oh, gosh." Lew snapped, "My raise."

The woman nervously ran her fingers over her remaining chips and said, "Oh shit! I fold."

Charlie smiled wolfishly at Lew and said, "Just you and me, old buddy; what could be cozier? How much do you have left, high roller?"

Lew glared at his opponent with animal hate as he counted his own depleted chips and muttered, "Seventeen dollars."

"Seventeen dollars is my bet," said Charlie flatly.

Lew hesitated before he said, "Call . . . seven, nothing."

Charlie slowly spread his cards as he read them off, "Six, five, four, ace, and joker. The joker is wild, remember?"

Lew's fist slammed down on the table, "You bastard! That card that went out of play was the fucking *joker,* wasn't it?"

"It sure was, sweetheart."

Lew turned to Denny and insisted, "That was the card he wouldn't give up after it went out of play, dammit!"

Denny shrugged and replied, "That's been settled, mister. That's yesterday's news. The house made a ruling, and it's too late to ask for another after you've lost."

"You lied to the house man!" insisted Lew. "I see it all, now! You two are working together! That's why you two guys are the only ones ahead in this fucking game! You two motherfuckers are partners!"

Denny half rose as he protested, "Hey, wait just a fucking *minute*, friend!"

And then Lew's hamlike fist crashed into his face, splitting Denny's lip and sending him to the rug.

Denny rolled out of the way of a kick. It wasn't too clear, at the moment, who was trying to kick him. An upended waitress landed on top of him, spilling a tray of coffee on both of them while she managed to scream bloody murder. Denny crawled between a couple of overturned chairs and struggled to his feet just in time to be grabbed by two burly security men. Denny went limp and unresisting as a soothing voice said, "Hold it, chum. I don't wanna break your head if I don't have to."

Denny saw that Kenny, the house man, had an arm-lock on Lew and was demanding an explanation. Lew pointed at Denny and Charlie with his one free hand and said, "These two are partners!

That's what's going on! They been cheating us blind, and I caught them at it!"

Kenny stared thoughtfully at Denny, who said, "He's crazy. I've never seen any of these people here before tonight!"

"He's a mechanic," insisted Lew. "He slipped his buddy a joker in that last hand, and I saw it!"

Kenny sighed and asked, "Anybody else with a complaint to the management?"

The woman called Miriam shrugged and said, "I didn't see it that way, Kenny."

Lew struggled to free himself from the firm but gentle hold of Kenny and a security guard as he insisted, "She's full of shit. These two guys been smiling and signaling each other all night!"

All this time, Charlie had been watching with a disinterested smile. Kenny eyed him quietly and said, "Let's hear your side of it, friend."

Charlie laughed and said, "What do you want me to say?"

"The man accused you of cheating."

"The man's an asshole. He goes broke and can't handle it. *You* made the ruling on the card he's blubbering about. If he thought he was in a crooked game, why did he play? The creep never graduated from lagging pennies on the corner with the other little boys and, now that he's lost his lunch money, he wants somebody to kiss it and make it well!"

Lew struggled to get at Charlie, fuming, "Let me go! I'm gonna *kill* the motherfucker!"

Charlie's smile never faded. But his eyes narrowed thoughtfully as he said, "Yeah, let him go, Kenny. The man still wants some action."

Kenny's voice was disgusted as he warned, "There's not going to be any action, dammit. We run a nice quiet establishment here, and if anybody starts swinging again, they figure to draw back a stump! So let's all simmer down and talk this over like grownups, huh?"

He let go of Lew, who somehow failed to seize the opportunity to commit mayhem after all, and, when the men holding Denny saw this, they let go of him, too.

Kenny asked Miriam to fill him in some more and, while the regular did think it odd that Denny and Charlie seemed to have done so well against *her,* she couldn't really put a handle on anything illegal that had been done to anyone, aside from the protest over the wild card.

Kenny shrugged and said, "Okay. I think all three of you boys had better call it a night."

"You're throwing us out?" protested Denny.

"No. I just said I think you'd better call it a night. Why don't you cash in your chips while you're ahead and take whatever you're up to out of my club?"

"What am I, on *trial* or something?" frowned Denny.

Kenny smiled pleasantly and said, "We don't have facilities here for a trial. We just run a nice, quiet social club, see?"

"He means we get a fat lip if we stay," explained Charlie, adding, "Come on. Let's cash in our chips and I'll buy you a drink in a quieter neighborhood."

2

The bar was nearly deserted at this hour. It looked like a neighborhood joint that stayed open all night just in case a live one came down the pike. An Art Deco jukebox was crooning lonesomely in the corner, and Bill Denny was wondering how to get rid of his new-found albatross as Charlie prattled on about his adventures, which consisted, for the most part, of booze, broads, and various games of chance. According to Charlie, he was good at all three activities.

Denny had tried to ditch him, but Charlie had tagged along like a friendly puppy, all the way from the club. At the moment, he was counting his winnings on the bar.

Charlie said, "Three twenty-five. Not a bad snipe, considering we got thrown out just as we were getting hot. How'd you make out?"

"If you don't mind, I like to drink alone."

"I have you down for about two forty-five in the plus. Am I right?"

"I don't know. Something like that. Look, Charlie, I don't feel like talking to anybody, you dig?"

"Yeah. You told me. How's the jaw feeling, now? That prick really cold-cocked you good, didn't he? That why you're sore at me?"

"I'm not sore at anybody. I just like to drink alone."

"Rot your liver out, that way. You know what I'd say if you were sharing a cell with me up at Folsom? I'd say you were going stir crazy. That's what I'd say. You ever pull any hard time, Bill?"

"You mean, in prison? For God's sake, no!"

"Yeah? Well, don't. Guys like you go nuts in the slammer. I've seen it happen. You strong, silent slobs go bananas easy. You got to be like me, Bill. Let it all hang out."

Interested in spite of himself, Denny asked, "How'd you ever manage to get locked up in Folsom, Charlie?"

"Shit. I don't know how I managed to stay out. I'm a sort of uninhibited type, you know?"

Denny rubbed his throbbing jaw and muttered, "Figures."

"I never done *hard* time, you understand. Just the usual busts a knockaround guy picks up along the way. Most I ever did was three for larceny. Got out in less than a year. Never stayed in long enough to turn queer, even. Hey, is that why you been trying to shake me? You think I'm after your fair white body?"

"Oh, for Chrissake!"

"Look, I'm straight. I just *like* you, Bill. You want to get laid?"

"I just want to drink. Alone."

"Sounds boring, if you ask me. I know these two broads, live near here. One of 'em likes to give French lessons and the other one's tight as a twelve-year-old cherry. Tell you what. I'll give you your pick and . . . "

"You pimp, too? I thought you were a gambler."

Charlie laughed and said, "I do anything, Bill. Any fucking thing I feel like. What do you do?"

"I gamble and drink. Alone."

"No. I mean what do you do for a living? You're not a pro gambler. No pro would have taken that punch for me back at the Big G. So what do you do when you don't gamble?"

"I'm a writer," shrugged Denny.

"No shit? Like you write books and stuff like that?"

"Just stuff like that. I'm a staff writer for a magazine publisher. Right now, I'm supposed to be writing an article on the ecology of southern California. So, if you don't mind . . . "

Charlie went over to the cigarette machine and got a pack. Then he came back, ordered another round of beers, and asked, "So how's it coming?"

"How's what coming, for God's sake?"

"Your story about the ecology. You got an idea yet?"

"I haven't got shit. And my deadline's this coming noon."

"You mean you gotta hand a story in today? Man, that's heavy. You've only got nine or ten hours, Bill. I wish I could write something that fast!"

"So do I. Look, why don't you go play in the traffic, huh?"

"Haven't finished my beer. So what's got you so fucking uptight, amigo? You're carrying a torch, right?"

"Bullshit! Who said anything about carrying a torch?"

"Has to be. You just won at poker. You got a job. So what else is there? Who is she? Your wife or somebody else's?"

"How'd you like a fat lip, Charlie?"

"Okay, okay, so I insulted your old lady. What did she do, throw you out?"

"Something like that. Look, it's none of your business, see?"

Charlie sipped at his beer and said, "Just curious, Bill. I like to read people, you know? You might say it's a hobby of mine. Then, again, you might say it's a business. Like I read that prick Lew tonight."

"You knew if you needled him he'd forget his game?"

"Sure. You can't beat another guy in an honest game of poker unless you psych him a little. You take that little bird-woman who read her chips all night, for instance. I knew I could fuck her up by raising the stakes until her nerves cracked."

Denny took a swallow of beer and asked, "So how come you didn't psych me, while you were at it?"

"Because you don't read good, Bill. You're a very weird guy. I guess that's why I took a liking to you.

I'm sort of weird, too. At least, that's what people keep telling me."

Denny said, "Let me get this straight. The reason you keep pestering me is because you're curious about me?"

"*Now* you got it, chief!"

"Okay, so if I tell you all about myself, will you get the fuck off my back?"

"Sure. Just let me get a paper so I can write down the story of your life."

Denny laughed bitterly, and said, "There's not much to put down, Charlie. I'm a hack writer on a nothing-much magazine that worries about the great outdoors."

"And you and your old lady have split up."

"Legal separation. She hasn't filed for divorce, yet."

"She will," said Charlie cheerfully. "It's this gambling thing of yours, right?"

Denny started to protest. Then he shrugged and said, "Yeah. Something like that. Look, it's an old story, Charlie. Guy likes to gamble. His wife doesn't want him to. Something has to give."

"It's the losing does it," agreed Charlie. "Dames don't mind a guy gambling, if he wins. It's the losing that bugs them. Dames are very poor losers."

"What makes you think I'm a loser? I won tonight, didn't I?"

"Sure. But you lose more than you win. I'll bet you're in hock to your eyebrows right now. You win enough tonight to take some of the heat off?"

"Some of it. Look, what's with this moralizing

all of a sudden, Charlie? I didn't exactly meet you in church, you know!"

"Oh, I'm a gambler," laughed Charlie, adding, "It takes one to know one. But you've got to stop this *losing* shit, amigo."

"I suppose you always win?"

"Hell no. But I'm not married, either. Gamblers, soldiers, and salesmen have no right to be married. Rolling stone and all that shit."

"Meaning I should quit while I'm ahead and patch things up with the little woman?"

Charlie shrugged and said, "That, or forget about her. You can't stop, can you, Bill?"

Denny started to protest. Then he stared soberly down into his beer and said, "No. I can't."

Charlie nodded and said, "Okay. Let's get drunk."

Denny laughed bitterly, and said, "I'll drink to that! But if you ask me, we're already halfway there!"

Charlie said, "Bartender, we are switching to boilermakers. I personally find beer drunks disgusting!"

Remembering it all, later, Bill Denny had only a hazy memory of the rest of the evening. Charlie sang a lot, he remembered. He even had a vague recollection of himself having sung all forty-seven verses of "One Ball Riley" to Charlie, or the bartender, or somebody.

Then they were outside and it was raining and Charlie was saying something about a car. Denny shook his head to clear it and said, "My car's in the

parking lot, somewhere. Where's the fucking parking lot?"

"You better come home with me," said Charlie. "I don't got a car. But my pad's just down the street. Why don't we go over there and sleep this off. Neither of us is in any condriving to dish."

"C'mon, I'll give you a lift, soon as I find my goddam car."

"Screw the car. You're drunk as a skunk. You in no dishcon, I mean, condishcon, to hold the wheel!"

"Tha's all right. I'll let you hold it."

Charlie stared owlishly and said, "That sounds reasonable, old buddy. Beats the shit out of me what you just said. But it sure sounds reasonable."

They both laughed and started weaving through the parking lot, singing off-key insults to the virtue of One Ball Riley's daughter. But, when they reached Bill's car, he couldn't find his keys. When he found his keys, he couldn't seem to find the keyhole. Had they tried to drive home in that condition, they'd have piled up for sure.

But they never got the chance. As Denny bent over to search for the keyhole, a human knee came up out of nowhere and smashed him in the face!

Charlie tried. But Charlie was drunk and there were three or four of them. He got in one swing at the man who'd kicked Denny. Then two others pinned his arms while another punched the wind out of him.

As Denny struggled to rise, Charlie fell on top of him, and a million years went by as the two of them were thoroughly stomped into the wet asphalt of

the parking lot. Amid the chaos, Charlie spotted Lew, the loser from the Big G, and just had time to realize they'd been tailed by Lew and some of his friends before a bomb exploded in his head and he decided to go to sleep for a while.

Denny was dimly aware of Lew saying, "Get the dough and let's split before the fuzz get here!" Then someone kicked him in the head and he went limp.

It got sort of quiet after that, and Denny lay there, letting the rain patter against the foggy windshield of his mind. After a while, he heard a moan, and Charlie said, "Well, what do you think of my friendship, up to now?"

"It sucks," groaned Denny, trying to rise and only making it as far as one elbow. He stared bleary-eyed at his battered companion and muttered, "I guess they rolled us, huh?"

"You guess right, amigo. It was that motherfucker, Lew. I think I'll try and remember him in my will."

A flashlight lashed out at them and a gruff voice said, "What's going on here?"

Denny noticed a red police-light revolving in the distance and said, "We were just rolled, officer. A hood named Lew and some punks of his just lifted our wallets and . . . "

"Ixnay, ixnay," warned Charlie.

But before the penny dropped, it was too late, and Denny had told the cop how much they'd been taken for. The cop's sidekick came over just in time to hear the part about the take being in the

neighborhood of five hundred and asked casually, "Where'd you boys get all that money?"

Cautiously, Denny said, "We, uh, just had it. They must have seen it when we were paying the tab, over there in the bar."

"Over in the bar or over in the Big G?," asked the cop.

Denny didn't answer.

Charlie struggled to his feet by slithering up the wet side of Denny's car as he muttered, "What's a Big G, officer, honey?"

"You'd better come down to the station house and explain all this to the sergeant," said the cop.

Denny got weakly to his feet and complained, "What are you talking about? We were the rollees, dammit! Why are you busting us instead of going after the guys who rolled us?"

"Cool it," said Charlie. "Eight will get you five that Lew was the guy who called these guys."

"No bet," said Denny. "But this is getting pretty raw, even for Gardena!"

"You don't like our town, mister?" asked the cop in a conversational tone.

"We love it," said Charlie, waving down the protest Denny was about to make and adding, "Come on, Bill. Let's get in the car before these mothers shoot us."

3

They let them out less than an hour after Charlie made his one phone call. The fine for disturbing the peace was fifty. Each. It would have been more if they'd hung around for the judge. But the Gardena cops were not greedy.

Denny followed Charlie out of the tank, confused and still burning over the frame. But Charlie was cheerful as he greeted the attractive brunette who'd sprung them.

The brunette shook her head wearily at them as she asked Charlie, "What's with you and this place, anyway? Do you have a romance going with some drag queen back in the tank?"

Charlie winced in pain as she put an arm around him and said, "They're unbelievable. Watch out for those ribs. I think they're all broken."

The brunette gasped, "Oh, babe, did they do a number on you this time?"

"Not the cops. Just a couple of their friends. I'm okay. It's a long story. Let's get out of here."

The brunette looked at Denny and asked, "So who's your friend? If I'm gonna bail a john out with

my own money, I guess I'm entitled to know who he is, huh?"

Charlie said, "Bill, meet Barbara. She gives the best head in L.A."

"Only for my friends," sniffed Barbara, adding, "Hello, Billy. Let's get out of here before they tow my car away."

Before Denny could think up an answer, Barbara had linked arms with both of them and they were going somewhere. Just where was a mystery to Denny, who was still wondering what he was *doing* here. The whole night had had a surreal quality up to now. It had all started when he found himself *winning* at *poker*. That was probably it, he decided. The whole thing was just a crazy, mixed-up dream. In a little while, he'd wake up and have to worry how he was going to pay off Spark and/or meet his deadline. Meanwhile, the dream was getting better and, what the fuck, he had no reason to wake up anyway.

It got even better when they got to Barbara's pad. Denny was almost sober. His mouth tasted like the bottom of a birdcage, and his sides hurt like hell. But nobody was kicking him or busting him or nagging, nagging, nagging about his having lost the payment on the house again.

The bathroom at Barbara's, like the rest of the pad, was pink, plush, and darlingly feminine. Charlie came in as Denny was gingerly peeling off his shirt. He whistled at the bruises on Denny's chest and said, "I wonder why they called the cops, if they intended to kill us."

Charlie opened the medicine cabinet and took

out a can of shaving spray. He shook the can and started to apply shaving cream to his own ribs. Denny stared blankly at him and asked, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's that warm spray-cream," Charlie explained. "It feels like a mustard plaster. Here, try it."

"No, I don't need it," protested Denny.

But Charlie insisted, "Try it, you'll like it." And proceeded to spritz hot foam all over Denny.

Denny protested, laughing weakly as Charlie cornered him and shot gobs of warm foam all over him. From the open doorway, Barbara asked, "What are you queers doing to my john, for God's sake?"

"I can't get him to bend over," laughed Charlie.

The girl said, "Well, forget about your sex life for now. I've just made us some breakfast."

Denny started to protest that he wasn't hungry. But he suddenly realized he was famished and, wiping off the warm foam, followed the others to the kitchen. The sun was peeking through the venetian blinds now, and, Jesus, he still had that ecology thing to turn in before lunch!

Denny sat down, gingerly, and started on the eggs Barbara had whipped up. They were good, damn good. But he had to get his head together and get out of here.

Charlie wolfed his eggs and a beer and had started on the racing form before Denny was half finished. He said, "You know, I think in the last year and a half I've been to at least thirty racetracks in almost every state of the damned union."

"How'd you make out?" asked Denny, not really

caring.

Charlie said, "Tapioca time. Busted. El broko!"

"Yeah? So how do you keep coming up with money to feed your losing streak?"

Charlie laughed and said, "Money is no problem, William my son. I steal a lot. Well, not really a lot. But it's easy to steal enough to lay a bet on the ponies or get into a game. You want to know how to steal a quick twenty bucks, William?"

"Not really."

"Well, I'm going to tell you, anyway. Every gambler needs an ace in the hole and mine is the Good Humor Ice Cream Company."

"You steal ice cream?"

"Sort of. You see, Good Humor hires just about anybody. So, when you're stranded in a strange town, you go down to the Good Humor plant and get yourself a silly white jacket and an ice cream cart, you dig?"

"You mean, there's money in pushing one of those little ice cream carts?"

"Shit no. You have to work like a son of a bitch to sell enough ice cream to make a buck. You're supposed to take the cart out, peddle the goodies through the town, and go back with the empty cart and what you took in in your hot little hand. I think they split the take with you. I never went back to find out."

Denny frowned and asked, "You mean you keep *all* the money you make selling ice cream? What does Good Humor have to say about this?"

"I don't know. I guess they cry a lot. When *I'm* working for them, I sell out in about an hour. I

sell everything for a nickel. The kids hit you like a swarm of locusts."

"Ice cream pops cost more than a nickel, don't they?"

"Sure. That's what makes them so fucking hard to sell. At a nickel a throw, I can empty the cart in an hour and, like I said, I take in about twenty bucks. Sometimes more."

Barbara laughed and said, "I'll bet the kids like you."

"They love me, and I like kids. So you might say I'm making everybody happy while I'm getting a stake together."

"What do you do with the cart?" asked Denny.

Charlie shrugged. "What do you mean, what do I do with it? Who the fuck wants an empty ice cream cart?"

"You mean, you just walk away and leave it?"

"Well, sure. I generally park it in an alley so it won't be noticed until I can make it to the Greyhound. I stuff the hat and jacket inside before I leave. That way, Good Humor gets them back, too."

"That's big of you," muttered Denny dryly.

"Live and let live. That's my motto. Good Humor can afford it. They got all these desperate people working for them for slave wages. But I don't screw them any more than I have to. Besides, nobody else wants the goddam hat and jacket."

"He'd sell them if anyone did," laughed Barbara. Then she dimpled at Denny and added, "I guess I don't have to ask why you wound up in jail, running around with a crazy like old Charlie."

The conversation was broken off by the sound of

an opening door. Barbara looked up and said, "It's Susan, home from the wars."

Susan was a rather fey girl, the wrong side of thirty. Her mascara was smeared, and she ignored the introductions as she went to the refrigerator and opened it.

Barbara asked, "How did it go, girl?"

"Okay," shrugged Susan, taking out a container of milk.

Barbara asked in a motherly tone, "Want me to heat some milk for you?"

Susan said, "No. I just want a swallow."

"Susan," said Barbara, "this is Bill."

Denny started to rise. But the girl called Susan said, "I don't want to fuck anybody right now. I'm very, very tired, and I'm going to bed. Like, alone."

"That's a switch," said Charlie.

Ignoring the crack, Susan took the milk and walked out of the room. Barbara put a hand on Charlie's wrist and said, "Cool it. Can't you see she's been crying?"

Charlie got up from the table and started to follow. Barbara shrugged and, turning to Denny, said, "I wish he'd leave her alone. But you know Charlie."

Denny shook his head and said, "I'm missing something, here. Is she Charlie's girl, or what?"

Barbara laughed, a short, bitter laugh, and answered, "Charlie's girl? She's nobody's girl. Or maybe everybody's girl. Susan and I rent by the hour. Didn't you know?"

"You mean you two are . . . ?"

"Whores," said Barbara simply, adding, "If you can't say it, don't play it. I thought, being a friend of Charlie's and all, you knew."

"I'm not exactly a friend of Charlie's," said Denny. "As a matter of fact, I just met him last night. We were in this game together and . . . "

"He adopted you," Barbara cut in, adding, "I know how it is. Charlie adopted Susan and me a month or so ago. Or maybe we adopted him. It's hard to tell, with Charlie."

"You mean he . . . ah . . . "

"Pimps for us? No such luck. He just moved in with us, and I'm not sure I understand how or why. We met him in this bar and he started buying drinks for us and we had a ball. You know how funny he can be. Well, anyway, we spent a wild weekend with him and then, well, his money ran out and he had no place to go, so . . . "

Denny blinked and said, "But you just said you, ah, ladies were, ah, business women."

"Yeah, ain't it a bitch? Susan gives a free ride to a good-looking guy now and then. In fact, she's much too emotionally involved with sex to be a good whore. But I'll be God damned if I know why *I* haven't thrown the bum out. It's pretty crazy, when you think about it."

Denny drained the last of his coffee and mused, "Yet you bailed us out just now. Paid a hundred bucks to get us out of the drunk tank!"

"Like I said, it's crazy as hell, isn't it?"

Charlie came back in, shaking his head. He opened another beer and said, "Susan's in love

again. Some married john whose wife doesn't understand him."

"Oh, Jesus," sighed Barbara. "She didn't give it away for free *again?*"

"He gave her fifty. That's what she's crying about. Says she told the guy it was from the bottom of her heart and that he slipped fifty in her purse when she wasn't looking."

"So what's her problem?"

"Says the guy was very nice and that she's afraid he thinks she's a whore."

Charlie sat down and added, "She must have come. Susan never wants to take a john's money, once he's made her come."

"She comes every time," protested Barbara. "He must have gone down on her. Susan falls in love every time a john goes down on her. I swear to God. I have to line her up with an anal sadist just to get her to take the jerk's money."

"Some sort of Puritan ethic hangup," soothed Charlie.

Bill Denny yawned and, to get off the subject, said, "I'd better be going. I've got to catch a few winks and make it to the office before I get fired."

"You can sack here," said Barbara, quickly adding, "On the couch, I mean. You nonpaying boarders get no bedroom privileges around here."

Denny started to protest, but Charlie said, "Take her up on it before she changes her mind. You'll only waste an hour's sack time going home to your own pad."

"Well, I could catch a few winks and leave for the office from here," mused Denny.

"I'll fix the couch for you," said Barbara.

She went to the closet and got out some sheets and pillow cases as Denny watched, bemused. By the time the couch had been made up, Charlie had vanished into Susan's room again. Barbara said, "That Charlie. He just won't take no for an answer. You sure you'll be comfortable here?"

"Yeah, it's fine, thanks. I'm really beat."

"Really really beat?"

"I feel like I've been dragged through a keyhole backwards."

Barbara smiled and said, "Well, look, I wasn't talking about anything all that acrobatic, Bill."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, what the hell, you won't be comfortable on that couch, will you?"

"But, I thought you said . . . "

"Oh, forget what I said. I'm full of bullshit half the time, anyway and . . . come on, I'll race you to my room!"

4

Bill Denny walked or, rather, limped into the office of *California Seen* at high noon. He felt like he *was* in *High Noon,* as he hoped against hope

that his boss had gone to lunch. Old Harris took three-hour lunches and, Inshallah, he could fake something on the typewriter in three hours.

The receptionist looked up casually, did a take, and gasped, "Mister Denny! What *happened* to you! You look like you were in an accident!"

"I was," muttered Denny, crossing his fingers to ask, "Has the Great and Wonderful Wizard Of Oz gone to lunch, yet?"

The receptionist said, "No. Mister Harris is waiting to see you in his office, Mister Denny."

He'd been afraid she'd say a dumb thing like that.

Denny went to his office and shut the door behind him, leaning sickly against the door as he ran a hand over his face and tried to get his head together. He couldn't lose *this* job, dammit! Jesus, he'd lost so much in the last couple of years. The wife, the house, even his goddam *dog!*

He went over to his desk and rummaged out the story Harris was waiting for. It started out all right. The title was just great. It read, *Grasping the Land*. But once you got past the lead-in paragraph, the paper was blank.

Denny threaded the unfinished manuscript into his machine and muttered, "*Think,* dammit! Remember what they told you in Journalism One. Tell 'em what you're gonna tell 'em. Tell 'em. Then tell 'em what you just told 'em. There's no big deal involved. You're not after the fucking Pulitzer Prize. You just need a couple of thousand words on that landfill rip-off and . . . "

A voice from the doorway said, "Didn't Sylvia tell you I wanted to see you, Bill?"

Denny looked up at his boss and, before he could answer, the man in the doorway gasped, "Jesus! What happened to you?"

"Accident on the freeway," Denny lied, "That's why I was late getting in."

"Christ! You look like you were in a five-car pile-up. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Just shook up a bit. Couple of bruises here and there. I spent more time filling out police forms than I did at the doctor's."

Denny saw the jerk was buying it and cursed himself for not having come up with a story that would have left his car out of it. He wouldn't be able to park near the office for at least a week, now. Fortunately, he'd come straight from the girl's pad and . . . where the fuck *was* his car? Oh, yeah, the parking lot near the Big G. He could pick it up later and . . .

"How far are you with that story about the land-fill, Bill?" his boss cut in.

"I finished the first draft last night, Mister Harris," Denny bluffed, adding, "I tore it up. Doing it over with a better slant."

Harris frowned and said, "Tore it up? Shit, Bill, we had it scheduled for this afternoon. Ross is working on the layout and needs a copy-count right now!"

"Tell him I figure three thousand words. I'll have it to him before five."

Harris looked uncertain and mused, "That's a

pretty short article, isn't it, Bill? I mean, we're featuring it on the cover and using full color on the spread."

"Look, Mister Harris, you want it *long* or you want it *good?*"

"I'm not complaining about your *writing*, Bill. But, well, I'd kind of like to see *more* of it."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning you've been handing in mighty skimpy copy. Your past few articles have been good, Bill. But they've been running just a few lines longer than a *Reader's Digest* vignette."

Denny shrugged and said, "Look, there's only so much you can say about ecology that hasn't been said before."

Harris snorted and replied, "So say it again, for Chrissake! *California Seen is* an *ecology* mag, Bill." He paused and added, "Aren't you happy here, Bill?"

So there it was, right out in the open like a raw oyster. Showdown time at the O.K. Corral. Denny dropped his eyes and murmured, "I'm happy here, Mister Harris."

"Yeah? Well, you haven't been *acting* happy, Bill. I mean, look, I'm trying to go along with you. If you've got some problem you need help with . . . "

"You want to know am I an alcoholic?"

"I didn't say that, Bill. But, well, you've been acting sort of wild since . . . well, for a while now."

"You mean since my wife left me," Denny

nodded. It was a statement rather than a question.

Harris looked uncomfortable and replied, "I don't pry into my employees' private lives, Bill. But I've got a magazine to get out on a slim budget. So . . . "

"Shape up or ship out?"

"Something like that. You're sure you'll have that copy for Ross this afternoon?"

"I said I would, didn't I?"

"Okay, Bill. No need to get our bowels in an uproar. I'm going to lunch with an advertising client. I'd, uh, sort to like to see something on paper when I get back."

Before Denny could answer, Harris turned and left the room. He didn't slam the door. But it closed with an ominous, final thud.

Denny stared at the blank paper and muttered, "Pompous two-bit shit! Who does he think he is, Hugh Hefner? Jesus H. Christ! You'd think we were putting a *magazine* to bed, instead of this throwaway piece of shit! Who *reads* this crap, aside from bird-watchers and little old ladies in tennis shoes?"

He typed, "The delicate web of life in Mariposa Bay is once more threatened by the ruthless grab-and-gut philosophy of the Diego Dredging Company and . . . " Shit. He'd said that in the lead-in!

The trouble was, he didn't *care* what happened to the fucking fish in Mariposa Bay! He wasn't all that worried about the fate of the California condor, and he was damned if he could see why he owed the Death Valley pup fish any favors. When you got

down to the nitty-gritty, there was only one thing he *did* care about!

Denny picked up the phone and dialed the number Barbara had given him. Barbara picked up at the other end, and when Denny asked if Charlie was there, she replied, "Yeah, he's standing right here, looking pleased with himself as usual. You want to talk to him, lover?"

She put Charlie on and the gambler asked, "*Cómo está,* amigo? What's shaking?"

"I'm trying to finish that thing I told you about. But I've got a terminal case of blank-paperitis!"

"Sounds boring. Is it contagious?"

"No. Just boring. Listen, Charlie, I'm flat broke and I can't ask for another advance with the front office pissed off at me. Uh, did they get *all* your bread last night?"

"Sure. But not to worry. I can kite a check, with the weekend coming up. How much do you need?"

"Just a few bucks. I can pay you back on Friday."

"What do you want to do that for? I told you I'm kiting a bum check, didn't I?"

"Look, Charlie, I don't want you to get in any trouble. . . ."

"Shit, I'm always in trouble. Tell you what. . . . Why don't you come right down? Better yet, I'm going out to the track in a little while. Why don't you meet me there and we can play with the ponies together?"

"I can't get away, Charlie. They're really pissed off at me as it is!"

"So, what can they do, fire you?"

"Something like that."

"Hey, come on, William my son. Do you want to *work* or do you want to *gamble,* for Chrissake?"

"At this stage of my career, I'm stuck with *both.*"

"That's very negative, Bill. There's working stiffs and there's sporting men. You gotta make up your mind to be one or the other. I mean, work gets in the way of gambling and gambling gets in the way of work. You dig?"

"Sure. But, up to now, I've lost everything but the fillings in my teeth, so . . . "

"Tell you what. I got a big push on something in the fourth race. Join me at the track and I'll stake you in on it."

"Dammit, Charlie, I can't get away!"

"Sure you can. Tell them you've got scurvy or, better yet, tell them you've just contracted V.D. I mean, for all you know, you *have!*"

In the background, Denny heard Barbara saying, "That's not very nice, Charlie!"

Charlie ignored her and insisted, "It's settled, then. I'll meet you at the track this afternoon."

"Goddam it, Charlie, I *can't!*"

"Yeah, look, this comes from a terrific source. I mean, if you can trust a man to spritz shaving foam on your ribs, you can certainly trust him to tip to a good horse, can't you?"

Denny hesitated before he said, "Maybe, if I can knock off a few pages before starting time . . . "

"All right. Why don't you just play it your way, and if you can duck out of there, I'll be at the bar

in the grandstand right above the finish line near the hundred-dollar window."

He hung up and Bill Denny sat there for a time, staring at the typewriter and not really seeing it.

He was going to do it, he knew. He didn't *want* to do it. It was insane, or maybe sick. But he was going to do it just the same.

What was the *matter* with him? It wasn't as if he needed the money. He *had* money, every payday. He'd worked a long time to get this far as a writer, and the dough wasn't bad for the hours he had to put in. Lots of guys thought he had a racket, and only the other day he'd sent Linda a three-figure check that caught up with that dumb court-order that said he had to support her even if she wouldn't sleep with him. If he had any brains at all he'd straighten up and put his next paycheck in the bank where it belonged.

"What about the bread you owe Spark?" he muttered aloud. But that was a cop-out, too. He didn't owe the bookmaker all that much and Spark would take it fifty at a time. Fifty a week was nothing, out of his takehome pay, if only he'd have the sense to take it *home,* for Chrissake!

If only he could quit, everything would work itself out in time. If he could just stop blowing his salary on this . . . this thing that was eating at him, he might even get her back. Linda had *said* she *loved* him, for Chrissake! Maybe, if he could get his head together for a month or so . . .

Bill Denny ran his fingers through his hair, got up from the desk, and walked out to the reception room.

He nodded wanly at the receptionist and said, "I'm, uh, going out, Sylvia. I, uh, seem to have banged myself up more than I figured this morning, and I'd better check in with my doctor."

"Oh dear, I hope it's nothing serious, Mister Denny."

"No. It's just this, uh, sick headache I can't seem to shake."

"Shall I tell Mister Harris you're gone for the day?"

"No. I'll, uh, try to get back, if the doctor says I'm okay. I'll, uh, work on that Mariposa Bay story at home, tonight, if I'm going to be tied up long at the doctor's."

She was buying it, he knew. But would Harris buy it? He'd sounded pretty definite before. But what the fuck, they couldn't expect an accident victim to work on a day like this, could they?

5

The redhead reading the racing form wasn't all that much. But she had nice legs, and there was nothing wrong with her face a little cosmetic surgery, or a dark room, couldn't take care of. Charlie Waters sat down across the cocktail table from her, gazed

out the picture window at the lush green infield, and observed, "Super day for the track. That rain we had last night was just enough to lay the dust. I like a nice fast track. Don't you?"

"Blow," said the redhead, not looking up from her racing form.

Charlie smiled boyishly, and asked, "Is that any way to talk? If the horses are nice to us today, this could be the start of a beautiful friendship."

"The horses are never nice, and I don't need a friend."

"You sound like life has been dumping on you."

"How'd you guess?"

Charlie said, "I'm a college boy," and opened his own racing form. The redhead glanced over the top of her form sheet, saw he wasn't deformed, and warmed enough to ask, "What do you think of Egyptian Femme in the fourth?"

"It depends. What kind of money are you using?"

"What do you mean, what kind of money am I using?"

"United States currency?"

"Of course. There's another kind?"

"Then I don't like Egyptian Femme. She's worth a small wager in Polish money. Maybe a modest bet with trading stamps. But I'd be cautious with real coins."

"She's that bad?"

"She could be worse. But I don't see how."

Warming to the subject, the redhead insisted, "Fifteen to one is a very nice price, isn't it?"

"What's nice about it? She could be forty to one

and you'd still be making a sucker bet. She's out of her class against those other colts, and it's a sprint race. She's drawn an inside position at the starting gate and has no speed of her own to break out before the first turn. I make her trailing all the way. She's just in the fourth for the exercise."

The woman studied her form and said, "It says all that about her here?"

"Doesn't have to, if you know how to read these things. It says a lot more, if you know what to look for. But I thought I'd spare you the details. I hate to hurt the one I love."

The redhead looked uncertain, but said, "I don't know. Those are awfully good odds and she owes me money."

"So bet on her in the fourth and let her owe you some more."

"Gee, I don't know, ah . . . "

"Charlie. Charlie Waters. And all I can tell you about Egyptian Femme is that she'd have trouble beating *me* at six furlongs! and with those golden words of wisdom ringing in your ears, my darling, I must be off to the betting window. You live around here?"

"Burbank. Like, with my husband."

"Nobody's perfect. Why don't I meet you here after the last race?"

"Don't be silly. I just told you I'm a married woman."

"Listen, I don't even hold Burbank against you. I mean, what the hey, what's one little drink going to hurt?"

"Well, maybe just one little drink . . . "

"Swell, I'll see you around the campus, dollface."

Charlie got up and headed for the pari-mutuel windows, feeling pleased with himself. It was so easy to make people happy, and the redhead now looked ten years younger than she had when he'd started talking to her. Poor old bat was probably stuck with some used-car salesman, for God's sake, and a little roll in the feathers with a new-found friend would do more for her than a facelift.

The redhead was forgotten a few minutes later when Charlie spotted his main man near the bottom of the stairs. The tout was an ex-jockey run to fat, and he owed Charlie a favor.

Charlie cornered him and asked, "How are you feeling, Ralph?"

The tout said, "Not so hot. The fucking flu is getting me down."

"I had the flu, one time. Everything I ate turned to shit. You should take a lot of Vitamin C, Ralph."

"What does that do?"

"Who the fuck knows? I'm not a doctor. I'm a horseplayer. I need a win, Ralph."

"Well, they like one horse in the fourth. They say Egyptian Femme can do."

"Egyptian Femme? Is this a joke, Ralph? Egyptian Femme's a fugitive from a glue factory!"

"She's paying fifteen to one, Charlie."

"Yeah, but she's a pig!"

"They're all pigs in that race, Charlie."

"You mean it's a fix?"

"Nobody said anything about a fix. They just

said she's gonna win. I never ask for details. It ain't healthy."

Charlie rocked on his heels and considered. Then he asked, "Are, uh, *they* the same guys who gave us those other tips, Ralph?"

"Look. Don't be so fucking nosy, Charlie. I don't have any opinion one way or the other, see? All I know is that *they* say Egyptian Femme can do."

"Well, they've been right before. I'll lay a couple on her for you and we'll see how it turns out, Ralph. I'll see you after the fourth, if she does it. We won't be on speaking terms if she don't."

Charlie went to the windows and placed his bet. Then he went back up to the cocktail lounge.

The redhead was missing. But he spotted Bill Denny nursing a beer at the bar. He slid in beside him and asked, "How's it hanging, champ?"

"Aside from a stiff neck and a couple of broken ribs, I feel just great. It's a great day for the track, I hear."

"If you win, it's even better. I laid a few on a sure thing for you. Here. Here's your tickets."

Denny took the pari-mutuel tickets with a nod of thanks. Then he did a take and gasped, "Egyptian Femme? I took a chance on my job for *that* dog?"

There was a roar from the grandstands outside and Charlie said, "That's the end of the third. Finish your beer and we'll watch ourselves get rich together. How'd you get out of the office?"

"Oh, I conned them. I hope. I should be as good a gambler as I am at getting out of the office."

"The old razzle-dazzle, huh?"

"A lot of razzle-dazzle. I'm probably going to be looking for another job next week."

"Listen, not to worry. I got this feeling about us, Bill. I mean, I got this feeling that we're gonna make it, see? We started our winning streak last night at the Big G."

Denny grimaced and croaked, "You call what happened to us in the parking lot a winning streak?"

"Shit, we won at the table, didn't we? Getting rolled afterwards was another kind of luck. That didn't count. Nobody can be lucky at everything. I mean, what the fuck, Nick the Greek *died,* after a while!"

"You mean, gambling's a different kind of luck than, say, getting hit by a truck?"

"Well, sure it is, William my son. A guy can have luck at gambling. A guy can have luck with the broads. But nobody can have luck at *everything.* That's what makes life so interesting."

"I'm afraid my gambling luck's been pretty shitty up to now."

"How about broads?"

"So-so. It hasn't cost as much to lose at *that* game."

"Yeah, well, I brought you both kinds of luck, last night, and if any man was right about this race . . . Listen! They're off!"

Both men went to the window as the P.A. system blared, "And into the first turn, it's still Snips and Snails by a length. River Boat second. Hi-Lo third, Langley fourth, the Deacon is fifth . . . with Egyptian Femme coming up on the rail!"

Charlie gasped, "On the rail! Oh, no, you stupid prick! Get her off that fucking rail!"

Denny said nothing. He was so used to losing that it didn't hurt any more. There was only a numb ache in the pit of his stomach and . . .

"Egyptian Femme is gaining on Langley," blared the P.A. "The two of them are neck to neck and . . . Egyptian Femme has nosed ahead, and it's Snips and Snails, River Boat, Hi-Lo, and . . . Egyptian Femme!"

Charlie moaned, "Come on, you fuck, *move!*"

"She might come in third," opined Denny, "You should have placed her to show!"

"I placed her to *win,* goddam her eyes! Come on, you miserable four-legged piece of shit! Get off that fucking rail!"

The bored voice on the P.A. called, "And into the far turn, it's still Snips and Snails by a length and . . . wait a minute, Hi-Lo has broken stride and Egyptian Femme is squeaking up to him on the rail!"

"She's coming in third," grinned Denny.

"Third's not good enough, dammit! Come on, Egyptian Femme! I'll buy you a new dress! I'll even eat your pussy! Get off that fucking rail and *run,* sweetheart!"

Denny stared across the outfield, trying to make out the colors of Egyptian Femme as they broke from the turn. At this range, all he could see was a blur of moving horseflesh, with that damned Snips and Snails way the hell out in front of the pack!

The P.A. blared, "River Boat is gaining on

Snips and Snails, who's losing steam on the outside. It's Snips and Snails, River Boat, Hi-Lo, and . . . Egyptian Femme!"

"I thought she was ahead of Hi-Lo," groaned Denny.

Ignoring him, Charlie screamed, "I'll take you to Tahiti, baby. For Chrissake, I'll even *marry* you! That's my *eating* money riding on you, babe!"

The P.A. said, "Oh, oh! Egyptian Femme is coming up on the rail. She's gaining ground and . . . It's River Boat in the lead, Snips and Snails, Hi-Lo, and . . . No! It's Egyptian Femme third. On the rail and coming up fast!"

"She heard me," laughed Charlie, adding, "Come on, babe! You can do it! You've *got* to do it! I'll slash my fucking wrists in your oat bucket if you let me down now!"

The P.A. cut in, "And in the stretch . . . It's River Boat by a head, with Hi-Lo and Egyptian Femme fighting for show!"

They'd lost, Bill Denny knew. There was no way on earth for any horse to come from third this late in the race. It didn't feel too bad, this time. Just that same dull ache that never went away, day or night, unless he was ahead.

Charlie was swearing and waving his arms, and Denny watched him, bemused. He knew that in a few minutes Charlie would have shrugged this whole thing off and be handicapping the next race. It must be nice to be like Charlie. Why couldn't *he* be like that? The whole thing was just a cosmic joke, anyway. What was he trying to prove?

The P.A. crackled, "Hi-Lo has broken stride again! It looks like he's thrown a shoe and . . . yes, he's dropping back, and it's River Boat and . . . Egyptian Femme, moving up!"

"Get it up there! Get it up there, for Chrissake," Charlie shouted.

"And . . . coming to the finish line, it's River Boat and Egyptian Femme, neck and neck and nose to nose and fighting all the way!"

"We won, we won, we won!," chortled Charlie.

But they hadn't won. Not yet. And the dull ache was still there in Bill Denny's gut.

And then the announcer said, "And over the line . . . it looks like . . . yes, it's a photo finish, folks! It's River Boat and Egyptian Femme, followed by . . . Hold on to your tickets."

Charlie threw his arms around Denny and laughed, "What did I tell you? We're on a winning streak, William my son! Come on! Let's cash these in and . . . Oh shit, let's get out of here!"

"What's the matter?"

"You see that redhead over there? The one who's rummaging in her handbag for a gun?"

Denny looked over Charlie's shoulder and shrugged. "She's pretty shopworn for you, isn't she?"

"She looked a lot better before I touted her off Egyptian Femme. Come on, let's get out of here before she spots me. I'm too young to die!"

They were on the stairs when the P.A. announced, "We have the results of that last race,

now. It's Egyptian Femme by a nose. River Boat to place. Snips and Snails to show."

"What did I tell you?," laughed Charlie, "Let's get to the windows ahead of the crowd and . . . what's the matter? You sick or something?"

"I feel . . . funny," said Denny.

"Jesus. You look like you just got kicked in the guts again. What are you worried about, Bill? I told you the fucking horse would win, didn't I?"

"I feel okay. Just sort of, well, funny. I guess it was that photo finish. Yeah, it made me sort of edgy to be so close and yet so far. I'm okay, now that it's official."

"Jesus, you'd think you'd *lost*, from the way you're acting. This action's no fun unless you enjoy it, for Chrissake. You sure you're into the right line of kicks, Bill? Maybe you should take up child molesting or something, huh?"

"Dammit, I said I was okay. Come on, let's see how much we won!"

"Let's see how much we won *fast*, old buddy! That redhead's just spotted me, and she's coming on fast! I don't think she loves me anymore!"

6

The doorbell was ringing insistently, and Barbara said, "She's on time, isn't she?"

Susan grimaced, said, "Silly old freak," and went back to her movie magazine as Barbara went to answer the door.

The delivery man burst in, overloaded with two huge gourmet gift-packages and began to sing in a rich Italian baritone, "Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you . . . "

"There must be some mistake," said Barbara. "Nobody here has a birthday!"

The delivery man ignored her and began to sing "Ridé, Pagliacci" in a very professional attempt at Caruso. Barbara rolled her eyes heavenward and muttered, "Freaks! Every goddam freak in California has me in their little black book!"

Then a monstrous plush koala bear followed the delivery man through the door and Barbara went, "Gleep!"

She saw Charlie holding the koala bear from behind and sighed, "Thank God it's you. I've never balled a koala bear, and I wasn't about to start!"

Bill Denny followed the delivery man, the koala bear, and Charlie inside as the girls applauded with delight. Neither of the boys were feeling any pain, and the delivery man nearly kissed Charlie's hand when he saw the size of his tip. He left, singing "Veste la Giubba" at the top of his voice, and both men fell, laughing, to the couch. Barbara eyed the two huge gift packages and said, "You won at the track."

Susan asked, "What have you been drinking and who was that weird man?"

"A baritone," said Charlie, adding, "The koala bear is for you, even if it is Barbara's birthday."

Barbara said, "It's not my birthday, you goof!"

Charlie handed the koala bear to Susan, who hugged it with delight, and insisted, "It has to be your birthday. We can't have a birthday without a birthday girl. Open the packages. There's all sorts of crap in there. Chocolates, cookies, imported sardines, some weird cheese that smells like old gym socks . . . "

"Charlie . . . we . . . "

"And after we stuff ourselves with all those goodies, Bill and me are gonna take you out on the town. Sweet William and me won and won and won, ladies. Nothing is too good for our friends tonight!"

"Charlie, we can't. We've, uh, got a date."

"You mean, like a professional date?"

"I'm afraid so, Charlie. Mister Fetish is due here any minute and . . . "

"I'll kill him," said Charlie. "He who touches my

woman, dies. Besides, it's your birthday. That faggot pimp of yours has no right to line you up with an acrobat on your birthday!"

"Mister Fetish isn't an acrobat," said Susan brightly. "He's a queer, I think."

Charlie looked blank, and Barbara filled in with, "He's a rich drag queen. A *very* rich drag queen. It's worth a hundred and fifty to us, Charlie."

Charlie shook his head and insisted, "I don't get it. I mean, I can see a drag queen dating Bill and me here. But . . . No, it just won't scan!"

"He isn't interested in sex," explained Barbara. "He's just a harmless old goof who likes to dress up like a woman and go out with the rest of the girls, see?"

"You mean, that's it? That's all the freak wants?"

"Yes, we date him about once a month. He takes Susan and me out to all the best nightclubs and spends money like it's going out of style. He's pretty ugly, as a woman. But when he takes Susan and me along, he gets a lot of action from the guys in all the bars. That's how he gets his jollies."

"You mean he uses you two to bait sailors, for Chrissake?"

Denny said, "He must get beat up a lot."

Susan laughed and said, "Oh, pooh, he doesn't put out. He just likes to flirt with men. I don't think the poor old silly *has* any sex life, except in his head. I mean, really in his head. Inside, he's pretty weird."

Charlie laughed and said, "Well, let's say we cut

out before he gets here. Let him get his kicks some other way."

"Charlie, we can't. He's due here any minute and . . . well, he's too good a customer to lose."

Before Charlie could come up with another ploy, the buzzer sounded and Barbara said, "Shit! It's him!"

"You two had better split," added Susan.

Charlie got up and headed for the door, saying, "I'll handle the freak." But Barbara grabbed him and pleaded, "Please, don't do it, Charlie. We really can't afford to lose him. Come on, you've got to duck out the back. You too, Bill! I really mean it!"

Charlie looked undecided as the buzzer sounded again. But Denny got up and muttered, "Come on, Charlie. You can't refuse a birthday girl."

Charlie allowed Denny and Barbara to drag him out the back way as Susan went to answer the door. Barbara shot Denny a grateful look and said, "Thanks, Bill, I won't forget this."

Charlie muttered, "Why do I feel like I'm being mugged by all my best friends?"

"You'll live, sweet thing," said Barbara, adding, "Get him out of here, Bill. Get him out and sit on him, and I'll owe you!"

Still protesting, Charlie allowed Denny to drag him out the kitchen door. Barbara shut and bolted it, then went back to the living room where Susan was entertaining their guest, Mister Fetish.

Mister Fetish—his real name was Kramer—was a fifty-year-old man who wouldn't have been hand-

some in anything. Wearing a wig and a gold lamé evening gown, he was a bad imitation of a whorehouse madam who'd just been run over by a train.

"You don't think gold lamé's too daring for a woman my age?" he was asking Susan as Barbara joined them with a too-bright smile pasted across her face. She somehow managed not to laugh as she said, "It's beautiful, Helen."

Kramer lisped, "Oh, I'm so relieved. I was so nervous about it. You don't think I'm showing too much cleavage, do you?"

Barbara smiled and said, "If you've got it, flaunt it!" Mister Fetish tittered like a schoolgirl.

He said, "I just got so tired of that old spaghetti-strap look, and when I saw this darling little dress I just couldn't resist it. You don't think it's too tight around the ass?"

Susan couldn't look at Barbara as she murmured, "You've got such a shapely ass, Helen. It would be a shame to hide it from the world."

Barbara nodded and said, "It's definitely your best feature, Helen. That dress is a real breakthrough for you."

There was a no-nonsense pounding on the door, and a gruff male voice shouted, "Open up! This is the police!"

Kramer went white and whispered, "Oh, my God, a raid!"

"I'll handle this," said Susan, going to the door with a puzzled frown. There was another knock, followed by an insistent lean on the buzzer, and Susan wondered what could have gone wrong with

their fix. Their procurer had told them he'd paid off the fuzz, dammit! Maybe it was someone new on the beat?

The door exploded inward, and there stood Charlie with a stern expression. Behind him stood Denny, with a hopeless "I tried!" look on his face. Charlie flashed his open wallet, putting it away before anyone could have read his "identification" and said soberly, "Susan Peters?"

"Uh . . . uh . . ." Susan replied.

Charlie stepped in, saying, "All right, which of you is Barbara Miller?"

Kramer pointed at Barbara and said, "*She's* Barbara. *I'm* not!"

Charlie stared morosely at the transvestite and asked, "Then who *are* you, miss?"

"Helen. Helen Kramer. I don't live here."

Charlie turned to Bill Denny and asked, "Do we have a warrant on a Helen Kramer, Sullivan?"

Denny's sides were hurting as he replied, soberly, "I don't think so, lieutenant."

Charlie eyed the frightened freak ominously and, catching Barbara's eye, asked, "Something funny, miss?"

Barbara averted her eyes and shook her head.

Charlie said, "None of you girls are in a very funny position. You know that? You'd better search the kitchen, Sullivan. I have a feeling there's something fishy going on around here!"

Denny nodded and slipped past him to the kitchen. As soon as he was out of sight, he leaned over the sink and went into convulsions of silent laughter.

Back in the living room, Charlie was asking Kramer, "What's your connection with these other girls, Helen?"

Barbara said, "She's just a friend, officer. She has nothing to do with, well . . . "

"Your business, you mean? You think headquarters doesn't know what's been going on in this apartment?"

"Give her a break," Barbara pleaded, "She's a married woman."

"How about that, Helen?" asked Charlie. "Does your husband know about the kind of company you've been keeping?"

Mister Kramer didn't answer. Mister Kramer couldn't answer. He'd just wet his garter belt, and he was terribly afraid he was about to throw up.

Denny, having composed himself, more or less, came back in.

Charlie asked, "Find anything, Sullivan?" Denny managed to shake his head without laughing.

Charlie shrugged morosely and said, "Well, I was hoping we'd find something for narcotics. But all we can bust this bunch on is prostitution."

"Can't we settle it without going down to the station house?" asked Barbara, adding, "You know it's only a fine and . . . "

"Are you trying to bribe a police officer, Miss Miller?"

"No. I just thought you might like to take the fine down for us, see?"

"Yeah, I'll just bet you did at that. I'm putting that in my report, Miss Miller. Come on, let's go."

"You can't take our friend in without a war-

rant," Barbara insisted, adding, "She hasn't done anything, and this will just ruin her!"

Charlie hesitated before he said, "I don't know. She looks like a hooker to me. What do *you* think, Sullivan?"

Denny shrugged and said, "What the hell, we haven't got a warrant and it's not like we caught her with a john. Why don't we give her a break?"

Charlie stared hard at the frightened transvestite and said, "Well, I don't know. You look like a respectable woman, Miss Kramer. I might just let it slide, this one time . . . "

"Oh, thank you, officer! Thank you!"

"You're sure you're just a friend of these girls, though? I'd hate to think I was letting an expensive-looking hooker put one over on me."

"I'm not that kind of a girl at all!" sobbed the transvestite as Susan suddenly gagged, "I've got to go out to the kitchen for some water!"

"Watch her, Sullivan!" warned Charlie as Denny literally ran from the room in Susan's wake. Turning back to his victim, he said, "You'd better beat it before the wagon gets here, Miss Kramer. I sure hope you're telling me the truth. I'm gonna look mighty silly if they tell me at headquarters that I let a hundred-dollar-a-night girl slip through my fingers!"

The transvestite gathered up his beaded bag and, sobbing with fear and gratitude, eased over to the door. Charlie caught the warning look from Barbara and resisted the impulse to goose the idiot as he was weakly opening the door.

Charlie waited until the sound of Kramer's heels faded in the distance before he said innocently, "Listen, how does Mexican food sound to you guys? Hey, what's the matter?"

Nobody answered. Nobody could answer. Barbara was doubled over on the couch, laughing like a madwoman. In the kitchen doorway, Denny and Susan were holding on to one another to keep from falling to the floor. Charlie shot them a disgusted look and said, "Glass of water, for Christ's sake. I gotta get a glass of water. You idiots almost blew it!"

He waited until the laughter subsided to a roar and then he said, "Listen, about that Mexican food. I know this joint down in the barrio where they serve food and drinks right at ringside. It's a half-ass Mexican boxing club. Nobody down there knows how to box. But they make a real enchilada and that Cresta Blanca they serve washes it down just right."

Barbara looked up, her make-up a mess, and gasped, "You everloving goof! Do we have time to change into something a little less sensational?"

Charlie laughed and said, "Wear anything you like. But make it snappy. If you two girls take too long to dress, Bill and I are going to catch up with Helen and take *her!*"

7

Charlie had been right about the Mexican sports arena. The food was good, and the boxing was awful. The four of them sat near ringside, and Denny was afraid they were going to get blood in their food. Two Mexican kids were slugging it out with more machismo than skill, and the bout was a toss-up. It all depended on which boxer bled to death first.

The smoke-filled arena was crowded with Spanish-speaking shouters who seemed to be taking the fight seriously. The two boys in the ring were probably related to half the people in the club, one way or the other.

A Mexican at the next table shouted, "Man, that Vargas can *hit!* Two to one that Vargas takes the *cabrone!*"

Charlie swung around, owlishly, and said, "You're on, amigo!"

Susan, sitting beside Denny, whispered, "Bill, you've got to stop him. Those men look awfully mean, and he's betting and betting and betting!"

"Maybe he'll lose," shrugged Denny, trying to figure out just where he stood with the girls. He'd thought he was still with Barbara. But, ever since leaving the apartment, he seemed paired with Susan. It wasn't that he didn't like Susan. But, dammit, they all knew he'd started out with Barbara, and Charlie had gone to bed with Susan that first time . . .

The boy called Vargas landed a lucky right cross that staggered his opponent, and Charlie shouted, "Don't fall down, you son of a bitch! I'll kill you if you fall down on me now!"

He turned back to Denny and asked, "What's that guy's name? The one we're betting on."

"Rivera, I think. Listen, you'd better take it easy, Charlie. This is a rough-looking crowd, and you stand to lose your shirt or your head, either way."

Charlie swung around to shout, "Yeah Rivera! Who wants to lay me odds Rivera wins?"

A couple of grinning Mexicans came over to get a piece of the action and Susan said, "Oh, dear. I'll bet we get gang-banged!"

This was crazy, Denny thought. Here he was, sitting in a Mexican dive with a wild-ass gambler and a couple of cheap hookers, and he'd promised Harris he'd catch up with his work tonight. Jesus, he was even worrying about which one he was with! What difference did it make? What the fuck was he *doing* here?

There was a roar from the crowd, and Denny

looked up to see that Rivera had staggered Vargas with a vicious left. Vargas was bleeding like a stuck pig and the referee was getting between them. Charlie shouted, "He's stopping the fight. Our boy just won. How about that? You're bad, Bill. Real bad. With you for luck and me picking 'em, we just can't lose!"

He jumped up and went to the other table, grinning wolfishly as he said, "Come on, amigos. Pay the man who knew his ass from his elbow. *Gracias, muchos gracias*, you poor slobs!"

"Hey, Charlie, take it easy!" warned Denny as he caught an angry murmuring that had a lot of "Gringo bastard" in it.

The referee was holding up the somewhat dazed Rivera's hand in a limp victory salute and the crowd was getting ugly. Charlie shouted, "What's the matter with you people? Don't you have a humane society around here? That poor slob Vargas was getting killed in there!"

Someone threw a beer can and Charlie ducked, grinning, as he taunted, "My word, we are getting a bit salty, aren't we?"

"Salty is not the word," gasped Barbara. "We'd better get our fannies *out* of here!"

Charlie said, "I still have some bets to collect. Stick a rose between your teeth and they'll love you!"

Denny grabbed Charlie's sleeve, ducking another beer can, and insisted, "Charlie, you're going to get us killed. We've got to get the girls out of here. I mean, like *now!*"

The crowd was on its feet, now, and punches were being thrown all around them as the sore losers argued the relative merits of the decision.

Denny grabbed Susan's arm and said, "Come on. Try and stay on my leeward side."

Charlie and Barbara followed as a man in a lumber jacket began to fight with a Mexican in a drip-dry suit. Charlie laughed and said, "Hey, Bill?"

"Yeah?"

"I'll take suit over lumber jacket ten to five!"

"Have you gone completely nuts?"

"Why? A lumber jacket has to be at least two to one over a suit. I'll bet you either way. But I want the right odds."

Somewhere in the crowd, a gun went off and Denny snapped, "Let's get out of here. I'm not fooling, Charlie!"

"Spoilsport!" Charlie grumbled.

They'd just made it out of gunshot range when the first police cars began to arrive. As the four of them hurried away, Charlie cracked, "I still think lumber jacket was a good bet. Come on, gang. I know a place where they let you roll double or nothing for your bar tab!"

8

Somehow, Bill Denny got his ecology article finished that weekend. It wasn't good. But he got it finished and, Inshallah, he wouldn't be fired until the issue came out.

Sunday morning, Charlie dragged him back to Gardena. At least, that's what Denny told himself. Had Charlie Waters vanished in a puff of brimstone, he'd have found some other way to lose his garnisheed paycheck.

The casino Charlie said was a live one was smaller and less neat-looking than the one down the street they'd been thrown out of. Denny stood in the doorway with his mentor, eyeing the sad-looking crowd, and muttered, "I don't know, Charlie. There's nobody here but a lot of old ladies with purple hair!"

"They got Social Security to lose, haven't they? Come on. Let's find us a table and keep this streak *hot*, William my son."

Denny shrugged and followed him in. There wasn't all that much to show for what Charlie called a winning streak. The two call girls had

helped them spend most of what they'd won at the track, though Charlie kept insisting they were getting it free. Privately, Denny thought they'd have come out ahead by paying Barbara and Susan their regular fees. But Charlie wasn't ready to make that mental adjustment. Charlie was an incurable romantic, even when he suggested a swap at three in the morning.

An elderly couple came in behind them, discussing the high-rolling strategy of the Social Security set. The old man had a Grand Concourse accent as he observed, "*Nu,* give another two dollars, we go eighty dollars apiece. I should have my head examined already!"

His wife insisted, "Come on, come on, already! I need two dollars more."

"You'll play careful?"

"Will I play careful? I'll play so tight I squeak!"

As they drifted way, Denny nudged Charlie and said, "This is a bad scene. None of these people can afford to lose!"

"Nobody can afford to lose. Besides, there's no other action this early on a Sunday. Hey, I see a spot over there at that table. Somebody just stepped out to get a new battery for her pacemaker. I'd better grab it!"

Denny watched, bemused, as Charlie joined a circle of little old ladies, introduced himself as the illegitimate son of Nick the Greek, and sat down to play deuces wild.

Denny thought, "I really ought to get the fuck out of here." But he knew he couldn't leave. He knew

he was going to play. He always played. It was stupid and, at times like this, grubby. But he had to keep playing.

He felt so *empty* when he did anything else.

The *G.L. Sports Journal* is the bible of serious gamblers. It comes out once a week and lists all the pro football games, horse races, and anything else it's possible to lose money on.

Bill Denny was reading it in his office when the phone rang. He thought it was Production, hollering for some goddam copy, and framed an excuse about needing more time for research as he answered it.

But the voice on the phone wasn't production. It was somebody much more important, and dangerous. The voice was a silken menace as it asked, "How's it going, Bill?"

Denny said, "Oh, hi, Spark. I was just about to call you."

"Yeah? I'd thought you'd forgotten me, Bill."

"Hell no. I wanted to talk to you about that middleweight match at the Garden. I think that new contender looks good."

"I think he looks good, too, Bill. Do you have anything resembling money to put down on him?"

"Gee, Spark, I'm a little short at the moment. But you know me. My marker's good, isn't it?"

There was a martyred sigh on the other end of the line and Spark said. "I just don't understand you guys, Bill. When you win, you expect me to pay you real money. When you lose, it's all make-believe."

The voice dropped an octave as Spark continued, "It don't work that way, baby. Life is real, life is earnest, and it ain't nice to fool Mother Nature. You owe me, Bill. You owe me quite a tab. Or had you forgotten?"

"For God's sake, Spark. You're acting like you don't know me, for Chrissake! Since when have I ever let you down?"

"Since you talked me into giving you a couple of free shots, Bill. I guess I should have known, huh?"

"Hey, are you saying I'm a deadbeat?"

"I don't know what you are, Bill. I *thought* I did. I thought, what the hell, a guy has a steady job, I can carry him until payday as a favor. But payday's passed, Bill. A couple of paydays have passed, and you owe me."

"Damn it, Spark, if you'll just give me a break on the fight . . . "

"I'm giving you a break, Bill," Spark cut in, "I'm letting you owe me all this time without, ah, bothering you. But you've got to be kidding, Bill. What guy in my business can afford to let a client pay off his markers by carrying him until he wins? It's just not reasonable, Bill. The money's supposed to flow both ways, see?"

"You'll get your dough. I just need more time, Spark."

There was a long pause. Then Spark said, "A week. I'm giving you a week because I like you, Bill. Let's make sure I still like you a week from now, huh?"

Then the line went dead.

A voice from the doorway asked, "Who was that, your friendly neighborhood bookmaker?"

Denny looked up and said, "Hi, Charlie. How'd you get past the receptionist?"

"I proposed marriage. She wouldn't let me lay her on the desk. What was that phone call all about? Laying the old thug routine on you?"

"Yeah. Spark was such a friendly guy when first we met, too."

"Not to worry. They talk a lot. But they don't really send anyone after you unless you owe them five or six hundred. How much are you into him for?"

"About eight."

"Ouch! You'd better pay him."

"With what? He won't accept my virginity and I've barely enough to get me through the week."

The buzzer on Denny's intercom sounded and, strung out by the lingering tension of his conversation with Spark, he snapped, "I'm in conference, dammit!"

"Mister Harris wants to see you," insisted the secretary on the other end. She added, "He wants to see you *now!*"

"Tell him I'll be there in just a minute," answered Denny. He looked over at Charlie, dull-eyed, and said, "You'd better blow, Charlie. My boss is riding a broom and I've got to spread some peanut butter on him. What did you want to see me about, anyway?"

"The Laker game," said Charlie, "I got a tip. You know what the price is on that game?"

"Spark said five. But he won't take my marker."

"Call him back," insisted Charlie, "He must be out of his mind or out of touch to give a price like that! Take it, Bill. I got it on the grapevine, five is too good to pass up!"

"Charlie, you're going to get me killed!"

"Look, would I lie to you? It's your one chance to get even!"

Denny shook his head. Then he stared soberly at Charlie and asked, "You're sure about the Laker game?"

"It's a safer bet than Swiss money!"

The office intercom buzzed and Denny snapped, in a near hysterical tone, "I'm *coming,* dammit!"

Then he picked up the phone and dialed.

A soft voice asked, "Yeah?" Denny said, "Spark, this is Bill Denny again. I'll take that price on the Laker game. I want to lay on three hundred."

Spark hesitated before he asked, "Have you been drinking?"

"Listen, I'm not asking for a free ride."

"You mean, you *have* the three hundred, Bill?"

"No. But I know where I can get it."

"So? Why don't you get it and do something about your tab?"

"Listen, Spark, it's not exactly my money, see. I mean, I can raise three hundred to put on the Laker game and I give you my word about the other dough. I'll lay cash on the Laker game and, win or lose, I'll pay you what I owe you in a week or ten days. You have my word."

"A guy could go broke playing with words, Bill. This Laker game is for real marbles, huh?

No bullshit about unexpected medical expenses or alimony payments?"

"I told you I know where I can raise the money, dammit!"

"I don't know, Bill. You're pretty wild, you know?"

"Just put me down at five and I'll have the dough for you in the morning, okay?"

"Okay. But no tricks, this time. Tricks make me very nervous and I, uh, don't like to get nervous."

They hung up and Charlie said, "You're learning, Bill. You can't beat hard cash for softening a bookmaker's heart. But, no shit, do you really have three hundred?"

"No," said Denny. "But I know where I can steal it."

9

The Rabbit's Hat was an outdoor restaurant on the Sunset Strip. It catered to the Hare Krishna set and served organically grown fare. Bill Denny spotted Spark at one of the tables and took a seat across from him, saying, "About that Laker game . . ."

"You lost," said Spark quietly.

Spark was a dapper-looking man in an expensive brown leather jacket. His fingernails were buffed, and he reeked of cologne. But his eyes were the eyes of a knockaround guy as he added, "You said it was a cash bet, Bill."

"I thought I had it," protested Denny, "I'd just sent three hundred to my wife and she hadn't cashed the check. So . . . "

"So you put a stop-payment on it, right?"

"Yeah, only . . . . "

"Only the dame was too smart for you, and she'd already cashed it before you could beat her to the bank. Your wife must know you pretty well, Bill."

"Look, you gave me ten days, Spark."

"I gave you a week, which is almost up, and the Laker game was supposed to be a cash transaction. So . . . what are we gonna do about this, Bill?"

"Look, I've owed you before, Spark."

"That's right. You've owed me before, and I've carried you."

"Yes."

"With no pressure, am I right?"

"Yeah, you were nice about it."

"Forget nice. The point is, I was a gentleman about it. I thought I was dealing with a gentleman. But we live and learn."

"I paid you, didn't I?"

"It took almost a year."

"Yeah, but dammit, I paid, didn't I?"

"Forgetting the wait, that's not what's happening

now, Bill. I got expenses, see? I just went through two busts that cost me plenty. I got my mother and father out here now, and my own family expenses are something else with this damned inflation and all. Plus I am getting buried alive in pro football of late. Am I getting through to you with any of this, Bill?"

"Sure, I know you're not in business for your health."

"Was that not said to you before? Did I ever say anything about running a charitable organization?"

"No, you've always been straight with me, Spark."

Spark snorted and said, "The point is that I'd have paid off if you'd beat me. But you didn't beat me. I beat you. Comes payoff time and you ask for more time. Okay, I'm a soft-hearted slob. I gave you more time. So what do you do? You bet me again, and again you lose, and now you say you haven't got it."

Spark took a fork-full of bean sprouts, chewed them thoughtfully, and added, "You're pretty weird, Bill."

"Look, Spark . . . "

"No, *you* look, friend! Maybe you think I'm some sort of super asshole. But in my line of thinking you took an out-and-out cash-money bet, and now you're trying to rip me off. That don't set well with me, Bill."

"Listen, take it easy. I can have six or seven hundred for you by tomorrow."

"Yeah? So why didn't you say so? I was just about to have your suit bent all out of shape!"

"Just hold off until tomorrow."

"Seven hundred, huh? What about the rest?"

"Soon, real soon, Spark."

"Yeah? Okay. You want some of these bean sprouts or some pineapple juice or something?"

"I'm not hungry."

"Try it. You'll like it. Besides, you'll need the vitamins if I don't have that seven hundred by this time tomorrow."

Harvey Dorn's real business being somewhat illegal, the sign over the door read, "PAINT, PAINT, AND MORE PAINT. OWNER HARVEY DORN."

Inside, Bill Denny found the loan shark going through the motions of filling an order for paint. For all Denny knew, Harvey really sold paint, on occasion.

Harvey spotted him and asked, "Hey, Bill, what brings you here?"

Before Denny could answer, Harvey closed his eyes and said, "Wait a minute—don't tell me. I just got a flash. You know I'm blessed with ESP. My wife kids me about it. But even she respects my mystic powers. Tell me how close I am. I see you and your wife have made up and that she wants you to redecorate the house. I see a magnificent paint order. I see . . . garage door and possibly the front of your house. You really ought to paint that house, Bill."

"Harvey, I need a loan."

"A what?"

"I can have it back to you real soon."

"Well, I'm really a paint salesman. But . . . what kind of money are we talking about, Bill?"

"Four or five hundred?"

"That's a lot of money, Bill."

"Come on. You know I'm good for it."

"Yeah, I know but . . . ah . . . when you want my money I get sort of, well, *interested*, you dig?"

"I can pay the interest, Harvey, and I can get it back to you real soon."

"You have to. The interest is like compound, and I don't mean annually, see?"

"You'll let me have it?"

"I dunno. You still working. I mean, like at a steady job?"

"Sure, sure, I can pay you off in weekly installments."

"I'll tell you what, Bill. Seeing as we've known each other a long time, you can forget the compound shit. Just pay me back six for five and you take me and the wife out to dinner some time."

"Thanks," said Denny. "You're a real pal, Harvey."

"Forget it. I know who I can trust."

Bill Denny knew, too.

They said on the street that Harvey wouldn't send anyone after you for less than fifty dollars.

10

It was late when Denny drove out to the house where he and Linda had once lived as man and wife. He'd planned it that way. He knew his wife stayed over at her mother's house on her usual Tuesday visits, and he'd lied to Spark when he'd said she'd cashed that last check. There just hadn't been any way to *get* the fucking thing before tonight!

He parked up the block and walked back to the darkened house. He forced himself to walk casually. The neighborhood was heavily patrolled, and there was no reason to skulk like a damned burglar, was there?

Denny went to the door, resisted an impulse to look back over his shoulder, and slid the key he'd held out on in the lock. It made as much noise as a freight train going over a trestle when he turned it. He opened the door and . . . what the fuck? It was chained on the inside! Linda was home!

There was a muffled woof from the darkness inside, and Denny hissed, "Zalman! It's me! Shut up, for Chrissake!"

A dog's happy paws scratched against the door,

and Denny swore softly. Couldn't *anything* ever go right, for God's sake? What kind of a daughter would leave her poor old mother alone in Pasadena on a Tuesday night?

Maybe she had a guy in there with her.

The thought sickened him as he thought of Linda in another man's arms, doing the things and saying the things she'd said to him. . . . But, if she had a guy up there in the bedroom, he just might be able to pull it off at that!

He moved to a side window and, yes, the screen was still loose. Good old Linda. She never got around to doing anything on time. Now, if only she hadn't cashed that fucking check!

Denny opened the window and slid inside the darkened house. There was a happy scampering and Denny hissed, "Down, boy!"

Zalman was an overstuffed, cream-colored cocker spaniel that didn't know he was a dog. Denny bent over and scratched him behind the ears, whispering, "Some watchdog *you* are!"

Denny moved gingerly across the room. The entry hall was dimly lit by an amber night-light. He strained his ears to hear any sounds of movement from upstairs and, as he noticed Zalman rolling happily on the couch, muttered "Off the couch, Zalman!" out of force of habit.

Then the ridiculousness of the situation hit him and he laughed, going over and sitting on the rug near the dog-defiled couch. Zalman rolled over, all four paws in the air, and begged to have his belly scratched. Denny buried his face in the shaggy fur and murmured, "I missed you, too, you old mutt!"

The dog whimpered with joy and, for a moment, it was like old times. Then Denny remembered what he was there for and, getting up, went swiftly to the desk near the window.

He rummaged through a wicker basket of mail and a couple of drawers full of paper clips and belly-button floss. Then, just as he was about to give up, he spotted the envelope he was after. He tore it open and, yes, it was the check he'd sent her!

Denny stuffed the whole works in his jacket and paused for a moment before leaving. She was up there in their bedroom, he knew. Up there sleeping, as always, in the nude. He wanted her so much he could taste it!

"She's probably got a guy, by now," he told himself, bitterly. But he knew he was just copping out. It hadn't been a guy that had broken them up. It was this . . . this thing that was driving him to nowhere. Maybe, just maybe, if he slipped upstairs and into bed with her, and promised what he knew she wanted to hear . . .

"Forget it!" he told himself, heading for the window he'd come in by. "It's bad enough we have to rob her. Do we have to bullshit her, too?"

Bill Denny tore up the check he'd mailed his wife and drew the balance out of his depleted bank account. It came to two hundred and ninety-three dollars, and Denny took some comfort in the fact that the check would have bounced in any case. He'd forgotten those goddam service charges the bank lays on a special checking account.

He didn't pay his bookmaker, and he didn't pay

his loan shark. Instead, he and Charlie pooled their resources and went to the Big G. They broke even at cards and wound up the pointless afternoon by driving out to the trotters in the valley.

The last race, by some quirk of fate, found them sixteen hundred dollars ahead of the track.

As they left to find Denny's car, Charlie was apparently having an orgasm with every step. He kept saying, "Sixteen hundred, Bill! We won sixteen fucking hundred dollars!"

"I can use every penny of it," sighed Denny, wondering what was wrong. It was all right now, wasn't it? Christ, with his share of the take, he could give enough to Spark to keep from getting roughed up and even have a little left over to make good on what he'd stolen from his wife. He should have been feeling like Charlie. He should have been coming in his pants!

"Listen, Charlie," he warned, "I've got to settle up, this time. I mean, no koala bears or Mexican food, okay?"

"Hey, we gotta *celebrate*, man! What's the matter, you tired of Susan? You want Barbara back?"

"Damn it, I want to get *straight*, Charlie. Eight hundred won't get me half-way there. But it'll do for openers."

Charlie waved the sheaf of bills and chortled, "Not to worry. We're on another winning streak, Bill. We're heroes, see? We beat the fucking track and broke our losing streak. This has been my kind of day!"

"We'll bet some of it. Not all," insisted Denny.

"And we have to skip the booze and broads until we're further ahead, see?"

Charlie grumbled, "Shit, what's the use of winning if you cut out the booze and broads? I mean, I play life for *kicks,* Bill. If all I wanted out of it was *money,* I'd go get a *job,* for God's sake!"

They were parked at the far end of the lot, a strategic mistake near any gambling establishment. A dark mass separated from the shadows between the parked cars and resolved itself into a looming black dude with a snub-nosed revolver and a coked-up way of moving.

"Give!" said the black dude, pointing the gun at Charlie.

Charlie stopped and muttered, "You have to be kidding!"

"I'll kid you, whitey. I'll kid you with a .357 in your mouth! I watched you cats at the window, see? So let's not shit me, man. I know what you got and that's what I want!"

Charlie muttered, "Shit!" and just stood there. Denny moved slowly to one side and the heist man said, "Freeze right there, white meat. You make one move and I'll blow your fuckin' head off! I *mean* it, mother. And I don't mean mother dear!"

Charlie sighed and said, "I'll give you half."

"You *crazy,* whitey? Don't you see this gun in my hand? I want it *all,* man. You just hand it over and nobody gets hurt."

"I'll give you half," insisted Charlie, counting out eight hundred dollars and laying it on the

hood of a car. He stepped away from the money he'd laid out and said, "That's it, old buddy. You better take it and quit while you're ahead."

The heist man shook his head and said, "You are too *much*, whitey! Didn't you just hear me tell you this is a .357. Like, a .357 *Magnum*, you dig?"

Charlie shrugged and said, "I said you could have half. No way you're gonna leave me flat broke. So, look, it's been nice, but . . . "

"I'm gonna kill you, you crazy motherfucker! I'm gonna blow a hole in you they can drive through in a bus!"

"Do you really think that's your best move?" asked Charlie, adding, "You've got eight hundred without this thing getting all messy. Why not quit while you're ahead?"

"Yeah? Well, why don't I just shoot both you mothers and earn another eight the easy way?"

"Because it won't be all that easy. You shoot one of us and the other's going to jump you. Even if you nail us both, you're gonna make an awful lot of noise in the process and that track over there is crawling with fuzz. You really think eight hundred is worth a running gunfight all the way back to Central Avenue?"

"Hey, watch that Central Avenue shit, whitey."

"Come on, Bill," said Charlie, "he's gonna be civilized about this transaction. We've still got a stake and the evening's young."

"I'm gonna kill you, whitey! I'm gonna kill you dead!"

"Well, for Chrissake do it, or take the money and run! You think we've got all night to waste bullshitting with you?"

Denny's legs were slowly turning to jelly inside his pants as he stared death in the eye through the muzzle of a .357 Magnum. Then, with a sudden swoop, the black dude scooped up the money Charlie had placed on the car hood and ran off between the parked cars.

Denny sank to the asphalt, sure he was going to puke. But Charlie kicked a tire and swore, "Eight hundred shot to fucking hell!"

"You bluffed him!" marveled Denny, "You really bluffed him out of eight hundred dollars!"

"What bluff?" frowned Charlie, "No cocksucker's *about* to take my ace in the hole, unless he kills me, first!"

11

It was a beautiful day, and Denny found Barbara enjoying it on a bicycle in front of her apartment. She waved at him as he got out of his car and asked, "Can you drive one of these things?"

"Sure, can't you?"

"Not very well. I never had a bike before. Some john I know gave it to me. He thought it would make a nice present for me. Wrong! I think I'm going to kill myself on it yet."

"Is Charlie up yet?"

"Not only is he up, he's gone. I saw him dressed and leaving so early I couldn't believe it. I think he's skipping out on the rent or something. Wanna come in for some coffee?"

"I've got to get back to the office. Listen, Barbara, you don't know if he's won anything lately, do you?"

"Beats me. You know Charlie. He wins, he loses. Sometimes, I don't think he gives a shit, either way. Hey, why don't you come in for a few minutes, huh? Susan and I are all full of nervous energy this morning and, well, we could have a party."

"Another time, maybe. I've really got to get back to work."

He went back to his car and Barbara, giving up on the bike, went back inside. She found Susan doing her setting-up exercises in her shorty negligee. Seven stuffed toy animals were watching placidly from the couch where Susan had lined them up. The younger girl asked, "Wasn't that Bill out there just now?"

Barbara said, "Yes. He's looking for Charlie. What'll you bet he's broke again?"

"He's so nice," sighed Susan. "I wish there was something we could do for him."

"I invited him in. He's not hard up. Not *that* way."

"Gee, what *is* his problem, Babs? I tried and tried to get him to tell me about it the other night. But he doesn't talk much, does he?"

"He's a loser," shrugged Barbara.

"You mean, like Charlie?"

"Charlie's not a loser. He's a gambler."

"Well, sure. But aren't all gamblers losers, Babs?"

"Not if they can handle it like Charlie, hon. You see, Charlie doesn't *give* a damn. So he's always ahead of the action, no matter which way it's going. He's happy as a kid when he wins, and it doesn't bother him all that much when he's not."

"And Bill?"

"Bill's miserable when he loses and only feels, well, normal when he's ahead. The poor guy's really carrying a cross."

"I think it's his wife," said Susan, picking up a panda bear and hugging it absently as she explained, "He won't talk about her. But I think he's still in love with her. That's what I think. I think he just gambles to forget, right?"

"Wrong. He lost his wife because he gambles. Charlie tells me he's about to lose his job over it, too. Charlie's actually worried about him, and you know Charlie. If Charlie worries about you, you're in big trouble!"

She suddenly noticed what Susan was doing with the panda bear and laughed, "For God's sake, have you got the hots, Susan?"

"I guess so. I woke up feeling all tingly this morning and when I saw Bill drive up, I thought

we were going to have some fun and now I'm, oh pooh, I'm all up in the air."

Barbara smiled and said, "I'll get the electric wand."

"I can use *that* silly old thing on myself, Babs. I mean, couldn't we be . . . more friendly?"

"I'll ball you with the electric wand," said Barbara, firmly, adding, "You know I don't go in for anything *queer*, Susan!"

The office pool was in honor of some clown named Paul whom the receptionist had said was leaving for a better job. Bill Denny had put in two dollars and, even though he hated office parties, he had to protect his investment. He was tapped out and couldn't locate Charlie or anyone else he knew who might stake him to a few bucks. His four hundred had slipped through his fingers in nickel-and-dime bets. But he knew Charlie was on a winning streak. He'd have been at Barbara's if he was tapped out. Neither of the girls had seen him in days and, the last time he'd called, Barbara had seemed a little browned off. She knew as well as Denny that Charlie *used* her and Susan. She didn't know as well as Denny that Charlie would use them again as soon as he needed a place to lay his head. Charlie was so *good* at using people. It was hard to figure how he did it.

Denny leaned against a wall, sipping champagne from a paper cup as he watched the others having fun. Christ, some fun. Paper plates and cups already! The party was getting to the grab-ass stage

and Denny wished to Christ they'd announce the winner of the office pool so he could get the hell out of here. He wasn't sure where he wanted to go. He didn't have any place to go. But anywhere was better than this!

A voice in his ear said, "Bill, that piece you did on water pollution in the Russian River really hit the spot. You really researched that salmon kill up there, didn't you?"

It was Lloyd Harris, of course. Nobody else gave a fuck about water pollution and Denny'd researched the article from a backdated copy of *Reader's Digest*.

Aloud, he said, "Yeah, it was pretty interesting. Took me a lot of time away from the office, as you know. But I wanted to get my facts straight from the salmon's mouth."

Harris said, "Only one thing bothered me about it, though."

"Yeah, what's that, Mister Harris?"

"The, ah, ending. It ended sort of, well, suddenly. Like you just got to three thousand words and, well, *stopped*."

"Production wanted three thousand, Mister Harris."

"Yeah, I know. But we're not publishing *The New Yorker*, you know. I don't think our readers understand those *New Yorker* endings, Bill."

Denny didn't answer. They'd switched on the TV across the room, thank God. Some of the other guys from the office seemed to be interested in the game at Gilmore Stadium tonight, after

all. Not as interested as he was, of course. Not unless they'd bet six to four hundred with a certain book named Marc. Marc had said he'd carry Denny until Wednesday. Apparently, Marc didn't know Spark well enough to compare notes.

Harris droned on, "I've been noticing this trend in your other articles, Bill. Not that they haven't been good. You're a good writer, when you take the time. But, well, maybe I'm just getting jaded. But I get this feeling that I've read it all before, and, those *New Yorker* endings, Bill."

Jesus! There went a completed pass on the TV screen! What was the matter with those bastards? Didn't they *know* that Marc was mobbed up with the old Cohen Gang? He had a four-hundred-dollar marker riding on that game, for Chrissake!

Harris was saying, "You take that thing on the salmon kill, Bill. I was just getting into it and it was interesting as hell when, pow! You left me hanging. I mean, I thought it was a misprint or something."

"That's called creative writing," shrugged Denny. "Always leave them waiting for more."

"Yeah, but to leave the *ending* off . . . There's a big difference, Bill. Not that I'm trying to tell you how to write. But, well, watch it, huh?"

Watching the screen, Denny moaned, "Jesus! You *can't* let him make that third down! You just *can't!*"

Harris gasped, "Christ almighty, Bill!" and Denny saw that his body English had spilled cham-

pagne on the boss's jacket. It hadn't stopped the third down. But Harris was sort of soggy.

He muttered, "Sorry, sorry," and started wiping at the spilled drink with his hand. Harris pulled away and said, "Take it easy, Bill. It's only a ten-dollar pool, for God's sake. I'll give you the ten dollars if you're *that* excited!"

"Ten-dollar pool?" blinked Denny.

"On the game, of course," explained Harris. "Why did you think they turned it on? Didn't you know the pool was on tonight's game at Gilmore?"

"Uh, no. I hadn't thought about it. I thought they were drawing numbers out of a hat or something."

"Well, I can see you're no gambler, Bill," laughed Harris. "The office pool's on the point spread, see? Each of you drew a final score and . . . "

"I know about point spreads, Mister Harris," cut in Denny, turning back to watch the game. Jesus H. Christ! His team was getting murdered! What was the matter with them? Didn't they *know* what would happen to a guy who lost with empty pockets?

Harris was asking, "What are your feelings about what I said before, Bill?"

"What?"

"The Dutch-uncle talk I was just offering on your writing, Bill. Any of it sink in?"

"Sure, sure, Mister Harris. I'll try to remember my Journalism One from now on."

"That's not what I meant, dammit!"

But Denny didn't hear him. The game was over

and his team had been *creamed!* Jesus! Where was he going to come up with four hundred before Wednesday?

The receptionist yelled, "Thirty-two points. Bill Denny drew thirty-two points!"

Another girl squealed, "Oh, wow, you won the pool, Bill!" She came over, grinning, with ten singles in her hand and dimpled, "This must be your lucky night, Bill!" as she gave him the meager prize.

Harris snorted and said, "Make sure he gets it all. It seems to be the only thing he's concerned with tonight!"

Gripping the money tightly in his balled fist, Denny whirled on Harris and shouted, "Shove it up your ass!"

The party suddenly got very quiet. Off in the distance, a girl murmured, "Gosh," and Harris waited a long minute in time before he asked ominously, "What did you say, Denny?"

"I said to shove it up your ass, you moronic clot!"

"That's what I thought you said."

"Okay, so now I'm fired, right?"

"You read minds, too? Get out of here, Denny. We'll mail you your severance, after we deduct those advances you've been whimpering for!"

Denny started to say, "Keep your fucking severance." But he didn't.

He needed it.

Bad.

12

Western Avenue is a night-people place. A ticky-tacky avenue of porno houses, no-questions hotels, quick clip bars, and Orange Julius stands. Western Avenue after dark is devoted to relieving the two-bit spender of his two bits, and ten dollars can get you a lot of action, if you avoid dark corners and leave the clapped-up street hookers alone.

Denny was in a phone booth, trying to dial some action and only losing his dimes. He tried Charlie again, and, getting no answer, slammed the receiver savagely. There was a tinkle in the coin return and Denny felt inside. Ma Bell had just lost a dime, the hard way. Things were looking up.

He walked up to the corner and entered a darker street, keeping well away from the doorways until he found the shabby stucco apartment house he was looking for. There was no buzzer. But the super's door was unlocked, and he went inside. The super's apartment was dark and a family of what looked like refugees in a Russian railway station were watching Johnny Carson. The TV people ignored him and, returning the favor,

Denny walked past them to the kitchen. He knocked on the locked kitchen door, and an unwashed girl of about twelve opened it and stared dully at him. He asked, "Your father home?" The girl shrugged, stepping out of his way.

A nondescript band of men were seated around the kitchen table in semidarkness. A hoarse Sicilian voice said, "Hey, Bill. Long time no see."

"Hi, Nugie. What's the action?"

"Siddown and find out. We got some cold cuts and other shit on the drainboard. You eat yet?"

He nodded at the twelve-year-old girl and said, "Charlene, fix him a san'wich out of some of that shit, will ya?"

Denny smiled at the girl and said, "Don't bother, honey. I'm not hungry."

The warmth was lost on the girl, who merely shrugged and turned away. Denny wondered how a kid so young could be so lifeless. But he hadn't come here to do social work.

Nugie said, "Siddown, Bill. You know these guys? That's Nino, Harvey, Nick, Pete. This is Bill, guys."

One of the men might have grunted. None of the others said anything as Bill Denny joined the game. It was Nugie's deal and he said, "Did you raise, Nino?"

Nino made an animal noise. And Nugie said, "Your deal, Harv. This is a two hundred buy in, Bill."

"I, ah, haven't got that kind of money with me right now, Nugie."

"Yeah? So what the fuck are you doing here? How much a you got?"

"Ten dollars, Nugie?"

The Sicilian laughed and said, "Shit, the sandwiches I serve are worth more than that. We're playin' *poker*, bambino!"

"I don't suppose you'd take a marker?"

"What marker? You outta you' mind? I tell you what, Bill. I sell you one chip for you' ten dollar. That's if nobody else object!"

He swept his eyes over the other players and nobody said anything. Nugie nodded and said, "Okay. You in for one chip. You deal, Harvey."

Denny knew better. There is no way in the world you can win a single poker hand with one chip, even when the others don't know it's your last one. Nervously, Denny picked up his hand and saw the cards were so-so. He thought of a bluff. But what was the use?

Nino said, "Raise," and, when it came to Denny, he could only shrug and fold with a bitter little smile. Nugie smiled back and said, "That didn't take long, did it?"

Denny sat there, his mind in a whirl, until someone grunted something in Sicilian and Nugie nodded. Nugie shoved some chips in the pot and asked, "Hey, Bill?"

"Yeah?"

"You got any more money?"

"No. That was it, Nugie."

"So? Whadaya sitting there for? You waiting for a bus or something?"

Wordlessly, Denny got up from the table. He paused in the doorway, and Nugie said, "See ya, Bill."

As he was leaving, someone said, "Good night, sport," and there was a low purr of muffled laughter.

Nobody said anything to Denny as he walked back through the darkened living room.

They didn't seem to like Johnny Carson very much either.

Susan was reading *Stranger in a Strange Land* when the doorbell buzzed. She slipped into a little-girl housecoat and went to the door, asking, "Who is it?"

"Barbara?" asked a muffled voice she recognized as Bill Denny's. Susan opened the door and let him in, saying, "Babs isn't home. I thought you were she. I mean, I thought she'd lost her key again."

"I'm sorry if I woke you," said Denny.

"I wasn't asleep. I couldn't sleep tonight, anyway. We're going to Hawaii for two weeks and I'm all keyed up about it. I've never been to Hawaii, you know?"

"You and Barbara are going to Hawaii?"

"Yes, some, ah, friends are taking us. Are you looking for Charlie? He never did come back."

Denny stood there, weaving slightly. Part of it was the drinks he'd bought with his loose change, and part was sheer lost-in-the-woods.

Susan asked, "Would you like to come in for a while?"

"Well, maybe a beer for the road, if you have it."

"You're in luck. I think there's one left in the fridge. Come in, come in, you look like you've been walking for miles and miles."

"I ran out of gas," muttered Denny, following Susan numbly out to the kitchen.

Susan handed him the beer and proceeded to heat some milk for herself. She was such a funny little thing, thought Denny. She played with panda bears and drank warm milk. It was hard to figure.

Susan mused, "I wonder where Charlie could be."

Denny didn't answer.

She shrugged and said, "You're married, aren't you, Bill?"

"Yeah, I told you that. Does it matter?"

"Does it matter to you?"

"We're separated."

"Oh, then it does matter. I'm really sorry, Bill."

"Don't be. It's not doing us any good. I don't have any money, Susan."

Susan stirred her milk and said, "Gee, I just bought some new clothes to go away with. But I still have a little bit I could let you have. How much do you need, Bill?"

"Damn it! I don't want your money. I want to *give* you money!"

Susan looked blank and asked, "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, stop it. The money you girls get. Come on . . . "

Susan looked hurt and said, "That's a pretty shitty thing to say to a *friend*, Bill."

"Sorry."

"Wow! You're really hung up on that wife of yours, aren't you?"

"Oh for Chrissake."

"Don't for Chrissake me, Bill Denny! I'm not as dumb as I look, you know!"

"Nobody could be."

"You're just lashing out at me because your wife hurt you. But I won't stand in for her in the punishment department. You want to hurt your wife, go home and hurt *her!*"

"I already have. Look, do we have to pay for the analysis, too?"

"What pay? Have I ever asked you to pay me? I don't want your money, Bill."

"Strangers it's okay, huh?"

"It won't work, Bill. You can't hurt me when I know why you're trying to hurt me. So don't take your wife out on me. It won't help either of us, and I only cry on the outside."

"Will you stop with this bullshit!" snapped Denny, turning away and closing his eyes tightly.

Susan put a hand on his sleeve and soothed, "Why do you hold it in, Bill. It hurts so bad when you hold it in. Why can't you be like me and cry on the outside. It feels so much better that way."

"Bullshit. What have you got to cry about? Your panda bear been cheating on you again?"

He saw the tears in her eyes and quickly said,

"I'm sorry, kid. I know I'm being nasty. I've had too much to drink and I'm all strung out and . . . shit, I'm sorry, okay?"

"Sokay, Bill." She brightened. "I told you nobody can hurt me. Not really. Nobody can reach inside to the real me."

"Yeah? So tell me something, Susan. What's the real you?"

"A whore," she answered, simply. "Not pretty enough to make it as an actress or model and too pretty to be a waitress."

"It never gets to you? Inside, where we hurt?"

"Why should it? Men pay me to screw, and I *like* to screw, don't you?"

"Well, yeah, I guess everybody does."

"Would you like to screw me now, Bill?"

"Just like that?"

"If you want to."

Denny shook his head and muttered, "Simple, right? Just like brushing your teeth?"

"Don't be silly. It's much more fun than brushing your teeth, or have you forgotten?"

She waited before adding, "It might help, Bill. It might help you forget for a while."

"It's all so simple. Forget your troubles, come on, get happy, we gotta screw all the blues away?"

"Look, I'm only trying to be nice to you, Bill."

"Sure. She only fucks her friends and she hasn't an enemy in the world, right?"

"Don't say things like that. You make it all sound so . . . so *nasty*."

"Shit, what's nasty about a little ass between

friends? You want to go in the bedroom? Or, better yet, why don't we tear off a quick piece against the kitchen sink? It's no big deal. Let it all hang out, right? Jesus, it's too bad Charlie's not here, we could have it in both holes, standing against the kitchen sink!"

Susan said, "Bill, I think you'd better go now. I don't think I like you very much anymore."

Denny started to apologize. Then he muttered, "Right," and headed for the door. He met Barbara, coming in, and pushed past her without a word of explanation.

Barbara joined Susan in the kitchen and asked, "What was that all about. Hey, Susan, you've been crying again! What did that jerk-off *do* to you, Kitten?"

"Nothing," said Susan. "Nothing he hasn't been doing to himself in spades!"

13

You don't get far in southern California without wheels, and wheels take gas, and gas takes money.

But Bill Denny had a credit card.

It wasn't any good. He hadn't paid anything into his account in months. But how do you check a thing like that at three in the morning, right?

So Denny drove. He didn't know where he was driving, or what he was going to do when he got there. But Denny drove. He drove steadily, neither speeding up nor slowing down, and, when he came to a red light . . . tough shit.

There was a squeal of brakes as a diesel-semi driver swore at him for driving right through the intersection against the light. But Denny didn't hear. He wasn't listening.

Staring through the windshield, he could see other stoplights. Red, yellow, green, in a shifting pattern. The street he was on was straight as a string, and there were at least ten or eleven intersections coming up. What were the odds of running through eleven stoplights at a steady speed, taking them as they come on red, yellow, or green?

"I make it an even-money bet," frowned Denny. But he wasn't betting with money. He didn't have any money to bet with. All he had in the world was a used car, a tank full of ripped-off gas . . . and his life.

And so he bet them. It was crazy, it was stupid, and at best he could only hope to break even. But he had to gamble and it was the only game in town right now!

Bill approached the red light at Norton Avenue, neither speeding nor slowing down. It was very important not to cheat at this new-found game.

Looking neither right nor left, Denny ran the intersection and . . . nothing happened. He was still holding the dice and the game was getting interesting!

The next light was green. An easy point. Denny drove on, trying to keep his wheels rolling at a steady speed. He saw the light ahead switch from yellow to red and kept going, knuckles white on the steering wheel.

A heavy sedan was boring into the intersection, moving with the light in its favor. Denny neither slowed nor swerved as he held to a collision course. The driver of the other car didn't seem to know what the action was and it looked like this was snake-eyes coming up. But Denny muttered, "Hampton Avenue is our point. Here goes Hampton Avenue, the hard way!"

And then the black sedan swerved, wildly, and fought to stay alive. The driver of the other car was good. Damned good. Had he swerved one way, they'd have sideswiped. But the driver of the sedan was used to driving in southern California and tucked his hood toward the wake of Denny's moving vehicle. Denny's rear fender missed his grill by the thickness of a heavy paint job, and Denny drove on saying, "Hampton Avenue the hard way. Colorado Avenue is the point and . . . it's green to red!"

A station wagon slammed on its brakes and slid to a panic stop. A fast-moving compact swerved around the braking station wagon, picked up Denny in its lights, and brodied across the intersec-

tion in a skidding hundred-and-eighty-degree spin! Bill Denny ignored it and bored on through, rolling the dice, or, rather, his life, against the Big Dark!

Lomax Street was green. An easy point. Shit, *anybody* can roll a car through a green!

Death switched the light at Dean Crest Avenue to red just as Denny reached the intersection. A car darted across, and Denny's bumper missed its tailpipe by inches. And then he was through in one piece. Not much action on Dean Crest Avenue.

He was getting into heavy traffic now. But the next three lights were green. Death seemed to be reconsidering the rules in this game. Denny was coming to the freeway and . . . how did you play this game on the freeway? No lights on the freeway and the other drivers would be wary up there on the speed-slicked lanes. Not much action on the fucking freeway. Have to avoid it. Swing this next corner and stick to the stoplights on the earth-people streets . . .

A flashing sign ahead said, "WRONG WAY—DO NOT ENTER!" and Denny grunted, "Now *that* looks like *action,*" and turned the wheel to swing his car up the off-ramp.

Against the traffic!

But wait a minute. This wasn't the game. This wasn't gambling. This was . . . *suicide!*

Denny slowed, his mind in a whirl. He didn't care if he lived or died. What the fuck did he have to live for? Why not stake it all on this final roll and end the game in a blazing crash of glory?

Denny's car slowed almost to a stop as he

wondered if this was fair to the other players. He was headed for a certain head-on collision and . . . there might be kids or something in the other car.

He braked to a stop, his stalled car blocking the exit and his mind totally confused with conflicting thoughts. He saw headlights. A truck was coming off the exit ramp. Coming fast! It was a *big* mother, too!

Denny lowered his head against the steering wheel and closed his eyes, waiting for the next roll of Death's dice.

Tortured rubber squealed and a diesel's air-horn blared in the night, so loud it made his teeth tingle. The metal around him vibrated in the shock wave of a fast-moving vehicle and then . . . it got very quiet.

Slowly, surprised to still be alive, Denny raised his head from the steering wheel. His face a frozen mask.

"You fuck!" he swore. "You cheated! You cheated!"

Denny grabbed the turn signal and wrenched with fury, ripping it almost out of its ball bearings and cutting his palm. He slammed a fist against the dash and, yanking the cigarette lighter out of it, slammed it against the window, shattering the glass.

He tore the door panel off the glove compartment, searching for another victim of his white-hot fury. There was nothing inside but a road map. He felt no satisfaction as he ripped it to shreds. The car was resisting him. Placid in its metallic strength.

Denny exploded out the door, whirled on his heels, and threw a punch at the car. His fist was damaged more than the barely dented metal. Savagely ripping off the radio antenna, Denny started whipping the car as if it were a stubborn mule.

A car whirled off the exit ramp, outlining the enraged Denny in its headlights as it swerved to avoid the unexpected surprise. The driver honked in outrage and, as the moving car sped past, Denny blurted, "Up your ass!" and threw the snapped-off antenna at the receding tail lights.

And then he just stood there, empty-handed. The game was over. As usual, he was completely tapped out.

14

Denny lay in his small bachelor's pad, staring at the ceiling as he wondered why he was awake. He was sprawled across the bed in his rumpled clothes and there was no reason in the world to be awake at this hour. Chrissake, it was still daylight outside.

The knock on the door came again. It was a firm, no-bullshit knock. The knock of somebody

who wasn't going to go away until he answered it.

Denny swore under his breath and rolled off the bed, tottering over to the door. He started to open it before his survival instinct brushed the last cobwebs from his fuzzy mind. Then, with his hand on the knob, he called, "Who is it?"

There was no answer.

Denny let go of the knob as if had snapped at him. His survival instincts were shifting into high gear now. He called again, "Who is it?" and again there was no answer. Denny stared at the door. It was funny how he'd never noticed before what a menacing-looking thing a closed door could be when you didn't know, or didn't want to know, who was on the other side of it.

A million years went by.

Then a low, raspy voice asked, "Bill Denny live here?"

"Who is this? Who the fuck are you?"

"Bill Denny?"

"Who wants to know?"

There was a long pause. Then the voice insisted, "Open the door, Denny. I'd like to talk to you."

"I can't, right now, I . . . "

"Open the door. This won't take long."

"No, really, I can't! Uh, what's this all about?"

"Open the door and I'll tell you."

"I said I can't, dammit! I'll talk to you later!"

"You'll talk to me *now*, friend. Come on, open up!"

"I can't, I said. Not until you tell me what this is

all about. Either tell me who you are or beat it, see?"

There was a long pause. Then the voice said ominously, "I'm a friend of Spark's, Denny."

Denny swallowed the green taste in his mouth and asked, "Uh, how is Spark? Is he all right?"

"He's fine, Denny. A little short of bread. But otherwise . . . "

"Okay, so what's the problem?"

"Open the fucking door and I'll *tell* you what's the problem."

"Listen, I just spoke to Spark on the phone. I mean, it's all right. Everything's straight between Spark and me, see?"

There was no answer.

"Hey, come on, you can check with him. We're straight, I tell you!"

Denny waited for an answer and, not getting any, pleaded, "Damn it! You have your signals mixed! I'm straight with Spark!"

A new voice asked, "Why are you telling me all this? If you're straight, you're straight. Fuck 'em all but six!"

Denny almost fainted with relief as he gasped, "Charlie?"

"Yeah, open up. I'm lonesome out here."

"You're alone?"

"Sure I'm alone. The girls went to Hawaii, for Chrissake."

Sobbing in a gulp of air, Denny opened the door and Charlie entered with a puzzled smile. He asked,

"What's the matter? Your local enchilada godfather making house calls?"

"Jesus, did you see him, Charlie?"

"Saw somebody. He split when I arrived on the scene. What are you so uptight about? They never follow through. No book could stay in business if he started killing all his suckers."

Denny, breathing and focusing again, was suddenly aware of the ridiculous figure Charlie made in his doorway and asked, "Why in God's name are you wearing a Mexican sombrero, Charlie?"

"Beats me. It sure gets a rise out of the tourists, though. You should see some of the looks I got coming over here. You'd think nobody wore sombreros anymore."

A sudden suspicion struck Denny and he asked, "Charlie, was that you, just now? Were you putting *me* on?"

Charlie looked innocent.

"That wasn't very funny. Charlie. You don't know what's been happening with me. It was you, wasn't it?"

"I think I'll let you sweat it. Going someplace?"

Denny crossed over to his laundry bag and muttered, "I'm trying to get organized. I lost my job, and I'm all fucked up. Flat broke and ducking shadows!"

Charlie found a dirty sock and daintily handed it to Denny as the latter asked, "Where have you *been*, for God's sake?"

"Three guesses and I'll give you this much. My hat is a big clue!"

"Mexico?"

"Jesus. You must have ESP. Where are you taking that shit?"

"Laundry room, downstairs. Come on, I gotta get my clothes clean and packed. Uh, Charlie, you have any quarters?"

"Quarters, pesos, all sorts of shit. I had a very nice time in Tijuana. Viva Villa, and viva Zapata, too. Don't you think I look like Zapata in this fucking hat?"

They went down to the laundry room and, as Denny washed his clothes, Charlie tried to figure out how a man could place a little action on a rolling drum of surging suds.

Denny asked, "What made you decide on Tijuana?"

"I told you. A fortune lured me. Lot of broads down there, too."

"You could have told me you were going, at least."

Charlie shrugged and said, "I didn't know we were legally married. It was a spur-of-the-moment thing. I was in bed with Barbara when I had this incredible dream. I was at a dog track and I couldn't miss one race. In this dream, I swept the entire card. I bet on dogs I wouldn't know if they'd bit me, but every dog I bet was the champion of Mexico. It was so *vivid*, Bill. Man, I saw the colors, smelled the people, felt the cash—fantastic!"

He grinned sheepishly, and added, "Funny thing was, I didn't win one race!"

Denny said, "Well, you might have let me know,

dammit! I might have liked to go along, too!"

"You weren't in the dream, amigo. Besides, it didn't come true. I think it's against the law for Americanos to win at the dog tracks in Tijuana."

"If you lost, how come you came back loaded?"

"Who said I was loaded? I'm barely functional."

"But you do have *some* money?"

"Sure, I got down to pocket change at the track, lagged coins with some street urchins until I had enough to get into a poker game, and bluffed some tourists out of a modest pot. The hat and a lady named Felicidad cost me half what I won. But, what the hey."

"But you don't have any real bread?"

"About twenty-six or eight. But the night is young. I know a bingo game in the Valley and . . . "

"I've had it with penny-ante shit," Denny cut in, adding, "I've been doing some dreaming, too, and it came to me last night. I've been betting too *small*, Charlie. I'm just not cut out to be a steady gambler. I've got to high-roll or quit!"

"So maybe you should quit, then. I've been watching you, Bill. You don't *enjoy* gambling, Even when we've been ahead, you . . . I dunno, you've been all cut up inside or something."

"That's just because I've never won *big*, Charlie. I won't be able to put it all together until I really whip this thing. Whip it good, with real money!"

"Regular Amarillo Slim, ain't you? You know what you are, Bill? You're full of shit. I'll bet if you won a hundred thou, you'd still be walking

around with a tight asshole. Besides, you don't figure to win all that big. Not when you have to borrow quarters to do your laundry!"

"You'll get your fucking quarters," snapped Denny. "I've got a lot of stuff upstairs that I can hock. I've got a portable color TV and a tape deck and . . . "

"So let's hock 'em already and see what's happening at the Big G."

"I'm through with that Gardena shit. I'm going to Reno."

"Yeah? So, what's in Reno?"

"This guy I know tells me they have a forty-eighty low-ball stud game going up there that moves at a thousand dollars a chip!"

"Steep, but interesting. But why Reno? Vegas has the same kind of action, and it's a lot closer."

"Vegas is run for tourists by the mob. The action's honest up in Reno. There's so much money moving in Reno that the house is satisfied to take its percentage and run it on the level."

"Yeah, but I know a few decent houses in Vegas."

"I'm not going to Vegas. I'm going to Reno."

Charlie pursed his lips and said, "It might be worth a shot, if you had a lot of money behind you."

"No shot. I'm going to win."

"You know that, huh?"

"Yes, Charlie, I know that. I'm not going up to Reno to have a shot. I'm going up there to *win*."

"You'll need more than you can get hocking

your stuff. High rolling takes a lot of bread."

"Nobody's asking you to play, Charlie."

"Hey, what's with you? Why are you getting your shit hot?"

"I don't like all this pessimistic shit of yours, that's all."

"*I'm* a pessimist. Viva Zapata! I like your attitude, gringo!"

"I know how I *feel,* dammit!"

"Hey, don't be so sensitive. Keep feeling, keep feeling. I think you may be onto something, William my son."

"I'm going to *win,* damn you!"

"So win already. Nobody's stopping you. But like you're gonna need you some *bread,* man!"

"Don't interfere. I don't interfere with you, dammit!"

"Simmer down, I'm trying to *help* you, you jerk! I mean, can't we still be partners, old pard?"

"If you want to put up some real money, I'll think about it."

"Okay, listen. We'll hock your stuff and put a bundle down on this fight I know about. It's a sure thing and . . . "

"No way, Charlie. I'm not betting a dime before I get to Reno. You want to raise some dough, you do it with your own money. I need every dime I can scrape together, and I'm not risking a penny of it on sucker bets."

A woman came in with a basket of laundry, eyeing Charlie's Mexican hat uneasily. Charlie said, "I'll start right now. Please, Ma'm, can you

help a poor starving Mexican refugee? You might not know it, to look at me now. But, once, I was the presidente of all Mejico!"

15

Bill Denny hadn't expected to get all that much at the hock shop. But, just the same, the rip-off was outrageous. Denny pleaded and swore. He knew the cufflinks alone were worth more than the price that old Leonard offered for the whole kit and kaboodle. But the pawnbroker was adamant. L.A. is a loser's town, and Leonard knew Denny wasn't going to do any better anywhere else.

Vowing revenge, Denny drove over to see his insurance man. The insurance man wasn't quite as big a thief as the pawnbroker. He wore a clean shirt.

Getting out Denny's file, he made his victim wait as he went over the figures with a desk calculator. Then he muttered, "Well, let's see what's happening here, Bill. Okay, your policy was Twenty Payment Life and you've had the policy five years, right?"

"You ought to know. You sold it to me."

"You had to have life insurance, Bill. You're a married man!"

"Yeah, yeah, so what's the cash surrender value?"

"You want to cash the whole thing, Bill? I mean, we could let you have half and you'd still be covered if anything, uh, happened to you."

"I want it *all*," Denny insisted, adding, *"Now!"*

"You've talked this over with your wife, I suppose?"

"Come on, you know we've separated! You think I want her to get anything after the way she threw me out? Shit, let the jerk-off she's sleeping with support her! What's the score?"

"Not much, Bill. The most I can let you have is seven hundred and, ah, fifty-four dollars."

"That's it? On a ten-thousand-dollar policy, for Chrissake?"

The insurance man looked uncomfortable and explained, "It's only worth ten thousand if you *die*, Bill."

"Yeah, but the payments alone, in five years . . . "

"We make a profit," soothed the insurance man. "We can't insure your life on the payments alone, for God's sake. I mean, everybody dies, Bill! We're just betting that the payments on a thousand people add up to more than the coverage we pay off on, see?"

"Fucking vultures! What the fuck am I supposed to do with seven-fifty-four, for God's sake?"

The insurance man's voice chilled a bit as he

shrugged and said, "You could always die and win the whole pot, Bill. Look, why don't we forget the whole thing? I know you're between jobs, and I can carry you for a couple of payments until you're back on your feet."

"I want my money," Denny insisted.

The broker nodded and said, "I'll make you out a check. But do me a favor, Bill?"

"What's that?"

"I've been around this block before. I know how it is when a guy splits up with his wife and loses his job. In a couple of months, you'll be back on your feet and maybe even back together, and your wife will be nagging you about protecting her in case something should happen to you."

"You really think so?"

"Yeah, and when it happens—go someplace else, huh? I really don't have to take this shit from you guys, you know. My commission just isn't worth it!"

The car salesman was saying, "I dunno, this ecology shit and the way gas keeps going up has shot this racket all to hell. Lots of people are buying bikes and, besides, that car of yours looks like it's been around a stock car track!"

"Some kids at the beach started throwing beer cans at it the other night," lied Denny, quickly adding, "It's a new model and in mint condition, for God's sake."

The dealer ran a morose finger over the scratched finish and mused, "Needs a new paint

job and the dashboard's been kicked in. What did you do, lay a live one in the front seat?"

"French heels, and she wouldn't buy my vasectomy. But, look, you can rip a new dash out of a wreck and—"

"I dunno, these big gas-guzzlers are a drug on the market. I don't know who the hell I could sell it to. Too expensive for a kid and too beat up for a movie star. Nobody else in this fucking town can *afford* a car these days."

"You didn't tell me that when you sold it to me," insisted Denny. "You told me it was worth every bit of three thousand."

"Yeah, but that was a couple of Arabs ago."

"Come on. You've got to give me *something* for it!"

The dealer sighed and said, "Okay, I know I'll regret this. I know this white elephant's just gonna sit here and rust away in the rain. But seeing as it's you, I'll give you five hundred."

"Five hundred? You've got to be kidding. You know it's worth at least a thousand."

"Five seventy-five, *final*."

"You won't go eight?"

"I said five-seventy-five final and I meant five-seventy-five final. Look, you wanna take the money or you wanna drive it off my lot? I haven't got all day to stand here and bullshit."

Bill Denny hesitated. Then he shrugged and said, "I'll take it. But this is a real rip-off, you know?"

"Sure I know." The dealer smiled cheerfully,

adding, "All life is a rip-off, friend. But I've paid for my education and you can pay for yours. Come on. Let's go over to the office and I'll write you a check."

Denny followed, adding the figures in his head. It wasn't enough. Not nearly enough. And he couldn't think of a way to raise another dime!

It was up to Charlie, now. If Charlie could raise at least the fucking bus fare . . . no, they needed more than that. There was no way to high roll on what he had so far. Charlie would have to win. Charlie would have to win big. If he didn't win big, Denny was certain he was going to kill him!

The pseudo-nurse at the blood bank drew the needle from Charlie's arm, placed a wad of sterile cotton on the needle track, and said, "There, Mister Waters. All finished."

"Listen, I need another five bucks, doll," said Charlie, adding, "Can't you take another pint?"

The pseudo-nurse snorted, "You've got to be kidding. I gave you a break as it is."

"Break? What break?"

"Come on, I spotted the needle track on the other arm. But I figured, if the front office let you slip by, it was none of *my* business. How many pints of blood have you given today, anyhow?"

"Only a couple. I gotta lot of blood."

"Not as much as you think you have. What's the problem? You don't *look* like a wino."

"I'm saving up for this operation for my kid sister. The doctors say she may walk again, if only

we can graft a pair of legs on her. She lost her legs in Viet Nam. Before she was my kid sister, she was a war orphan."

"Come on. I've got to tap the next victim. You know the routine. Pick your five spot up out front. And, if I were you, I wouldn't give any more blood for a while."

Charlie swung his legs off the table, sat up, and muttered, "Why darling, why are you dimming the lights? I don't *like* to go sixty-nine in the dark!"

"Put your head down between your knees," warned the blood-bank girl, quickly adding, "I *told* you it wasn't smart to give more than one pint at a time. Now, just sit there and I'll get you some Coke. You puke on me before I get your blood sugar up enough for you to walk out of here and I'll make you clean it up!"

Charlie kept his head down, swallowing the salty saliva and trying not to gag; in a while, he decided he was going to live after all.

The girl came back with a paper cup full of warm Coca-Cola and said, "Here, drink this. It's got extra syrup in it. You'll feel better in a little while."

"I don't suppose they let you date customers?"

"Shut up and drink this. You're keeping a lot of the other bums waiting."

Charlie took the cup and straightened up, muttering, "I am not a bum. I'm a horse-player."

"There's a difference?"

Charlie started to offer a free demonstration of the difference, at the nearest motel. But somehow

he didn't feel up to any more bullshit. He swallowed the sickly sweet drink and got off the table, going out to pick up his winnings.

When he offered the cashier to bet his pay-off double or nothing, she didn't even smile.

The sugared liquid began to clear his head by the time he'd walked a couple of blocks, and, when Charlie looked around to get his bearings, he saw a group of leather-jacket punks lagging dimes against the cement-block wall of an industrial building.

He joined the game, after brushing aside some suspicious remarks. Although Charlie was very good at lagging dimes, he saw there wasn't enough action in this game to make it worth his while. Besides, he'd only won three dollars and forty cents when one of the punks started making nasty remarks about Charlie's mother, while displaying a six-inch switchblade.

Charlie snorted, "Go on home and jack off before I spit in your eye and drown you."

The punk made a threatening gesture with the knife. So, regretfully, Charlie kicked him in the balls.

He faced the others down, as his victim writhed on the sidewalk, and, when he saw none of them had the nerve to push it any further, he kicked the knife-wielder in the ribs, bent down, and rolled him for the contents of his pockets. It came to another dollar and a half. Things were looking up.

16

Denny sat in the dank and gloomy neighborhood bar, nursing a drink. The drink was a beer. This was no time to get drunk. He was waiting for Charlie, and the fuck hadn't showed. Where could Charlie be? He had to be on to something, if he was late.

Jesus, let Charlie be on to something *good* for a change!

It wasn't as if Charlie had to lose every time, was it, God? A blowsy woman down the bar asked for another drink and the bartender said, "That's it for today, Rose."

The woman protested, "Whadaya mean that's it? I'm not drunk, you son of a bitch."

"I didn't say you was drunk," explained the bartender, "I just said that was it. Rick told me not to carry you no more, see?"

"Goddam it, my credit is good!"

"No, Rose, it's not. Rick says I can't carry you no more until you pay your tab."

"Your mother takes it in the ass!"

The bartender shrugged and moved down the

bar to Denny. He poured another beer and set it on the damp formica in front of Denny, who asked, "What's this?"

"On the house. Every fifth one's on the house."

"Give it to the lady," said Denny, "I'll nurse this one for a while."

The bartender shrugged. Then he slid the beer down the bar to the disheveled Rose, who looked stunned at the manna from above.

Grabbing up the beer, the woman eased off her stool and moved closer to Denny, saying, "Hey, that's very generous of you, handsome!"

Denny resisted a grimace of distaste and tried to ignore her. The poor old broad was a real loser, he thought. Christ, it must be hell to be an alcoholic.

Rose leaned closer, reeking of armpit, Chanel Number Five, and beer, as she whispered, "Listen, you don't happen to have a dollar you can lend me, do you?"

"I'm sorry," said Denny, wishing he hadn't sent her that damned beer. He had to stay here, now. Charlie had said he'd meet him here and . . .

"Just a *dollar,* for Chrissake," pleaded the woman, adding huskily, "Look, I'll give you a blow-job for a dollar."

"I'm waiting for a friend," shuddered Denny.

"Yeah, so look, we can go out back in the alley, and it'll only take a minute. Come on, what do you say? Look, I'll even let you bang me against the wall for a lousy stinking dollar!"

The bartender said, "Leave the gentleman alone, Rose."

"Why? *You* wanna blow him for a dollar?"

"Okay, that does it. Finish your beer and split, Rose. I'm asking polite, see?"

The woman moved down the bar, muttering about fags and other tortured figments of her ravaged brain, and Denny nodded at the bartender and said, "Thanks."

"It ain't her fault," sighed the bartender. "She used to be a showgirl, you know? Yeah, she showed me her picture, one time. A real looker, old Rose was. It's too bad she couldn't handle her drinks. I hate to see a woman in that shape, don't you?"

Denny shrugged. It was too bad Charlie wasn't here. Charlie would have *given* her the fucking dollar. Charlie was like that. A lot of gamblers were like that and. . . .

Denny frowned. Maybe that was it. Maybe that was what he'd been doing wrong. Charlie had told him he hated to part with money too much to be a real gambler. Yeah, maybe *that* was it!

Bill Denny got up and slowly walked down to where the drunk, ravaged woman was staring vacantly into her empty glass. He took out his wallet, opened it, and said, "Here. Buy yourself some flowers," as he placed a bill on the bar in front of her.

The woman blinked at it and muttered, "Ten dollars? You *mean* it, mister? I mean, sure, I'll let you have it. But, ten whole dollars?"

Denny went back to his seat and the bartender gasped, "You gave Rose a ten-spot? Jesus, she'll take it all three ways for two!"

"That's not why I gave her the money," said Denny, adding, "I'll have another beer, now."

As the bartender drew another glass of suds, the woman came over, grinning, and asked, "Okay, lover, my place or yours?"

"Beat it," said Denny.

The woman looked blank. Then she stared at the money in her hand and asked, in a desperate voice, "What is this, some sort of a gag?"

"No gag, Rose. Just leave me alone, will you?"

"I don't get it. Nobody never gives me ten dollars, mister. Not for *nothing*, mister. What are you, some kind of a nut?"

The bartender said, "He told you to take it and *blow*, Rose."

The woman wandered out, talking to herself.

The bartender wiped the bar for a time with a damp rag. Then he brightened and said, "I get it. You're a *gambler*, right?"

"How'd you guess?"

"Easy. You had to be a gambler or a whore and, somehow, I can't figure you for no whore!"

Charlie Waters sat beside Ralph in the race-track bar as the two of them studied the tote board together. Charlie said, "I don't see anything I like in the next race. How about you, Jazz?"

The smaller man shrugged and replied, "Maybe number seven."

"Hi-Lo? Come on, Ralph. He keeps throwing his shoes. I think that horse is a closet horseshoe-pitcher."

Ralph said, "I was talkin' with his trainer. They tell me his shoes are nailed on, today."

Charlie swept his eyes over the others in the line-up and mused, "I dunno. The whole field looks like dogs, and I do lousy on dogs."

"So don't bet."

"Listen, who said anything about not betting, Jazz? What do you think I came out here to do. I mean, I can *drink* in *Burbank!*"

Ralph just shrugged.

Charlie drummed nervously on the bar and asked, "You're sure about number seven, huh?"

"I'm never sure," said Ralph. "I just said the hay-burner had new shoes. He did all right the other day, you know. Came in to place on three legs. Today, he figures to be running on four."

"Lousy odds, though," mused Charlie.

"He's favored to win," shrugged the tout.

"Would *you* bet on him, Jazz?"

"At those odds? No. You can't make no bread playing the favorites, Charlie."

"But, there's nothing else up there that figures to win!"

"Not unless they shoot number seven. Where you going?"

"The windows are about to close. Got to get my money down. Aren't you coming?"

"Nah, they have no push on anything, today. You're throwing your money away, Charlie."

"It's my money, isn't it? Thanks for the beer, Jazz. I'll see you."

"Yeah, see you, chump."

Charlie left the bar and headed for the parimutuel windows, counting his money. There wasn't all that much to count. But, at least he might double it and . . .

And then he spotted Lew in the crowd.

The heavy-set gambler who'd had him beaten and rolled was headed straight at him, head down as he counted a thick roll of bills in his beefy paws!

Charlie ducked back into the bar, grabbed up a beer bottle from in front of a startled patron, and got back out in time to see Lew's broad back rounding a corner.

Charlie darted after him, pausing at the corner to peer cautiously around it. Lew had stopped at a hot dog stand and had stuffed the roll away. Charlie watched as Lew bought a hot dog and turned around. Charlie quickly put the beer bottle to his lips, camouflaging himself as a thirsty nonentity. The burly gambler brushed by him without a glance. For a man who lived so dangerously, Lew was very sure of himself.

Lew moved on, unaware of the deadly earnest stalking game he was taking part in. Charlie followed at a safe distance, ready to cover his face with the beer bottle should the hulking Lew turn around again.

The guy was counting his money some more. Lew liked to count money, whether he'd won it or rolled a couple of guys for it. Charlie was less than twenty feet behind him when Lew suddenly stopped, did a take, and turned around.

Charlie's heart skipped a beat as he thought sure

that the other would recognize him. But Lew wasn't looking for a face in the crowd. He'd apparently come up short in his count and was afraid he'd just dropped a bill. His dark, beady eyes swept the cement as he counted another time and, satisfied, began to move away again. Charlie saw he was headed for the tunnel that led to the toilets under the grandstand and muttered, "Shit! I was betting on the parking lot!"

He hung on Lew's tail until the burly gambler ducked into a men's room. It was post time, and the corridor was deserted.

Gripping the bottle, Charlie opened the door to the men's room and stepped quickly inside. A man was standing at a urinal with his back to Charlie. But where the fuck was *Lew*?

Charlie scanned the pay toilets until he spotted the shoes he'd been trailing. The big thug was taking a crap and two more guys were coming in, just as the first man left.

Charlie went to an unoccupied urinal and placed the beer bottle on the tiles. He fumbled open his zipper and stood there, faking it, while the two men tinkled, talking about the last race.

Behind him, there was flush, followed by the sound of leather scraping on damp tiles. What was the matter with those other two guys? Weren't they ever going to finish, for Chrissake? How much pee can the human bladder hold, Sweet Santa Barranza?

Outside, the P.A. system blared, "The flag is up," and the two urinators hurriedly finished to watch the next race.

The announcer shouted, "And there they go," just as Lew opened the door of his cubicle.

Lew's survival instinct included total recall. He took one look at Charlie, and the empty room behind him, and swung one from off the deck!

The hamlike fist crashed into Charlie's nose and sent him and his beer bottle crashing to the tile floor. The beer bottle smashed, spattering broken glass all over the wet tiles, and Charlie rolled away from a kick, shouting, "Oh, beautiful! What a fucking punch! That's gotta be the greatest punch I've ever been hit with!"

As he leaped to his feet, Lew said, "Wait a minute, fella!"

But Charlie smiled through the blood running down his face and sighed, "That was lovely, Lew. You busted it clean, didn't you?"

"Look, buddy. I don't want no trouble, see?"

"God, what a punch you have, Lew. First my ribs. Now my nose. You really blow my mind . . . Wow!"

Then he circled between Lew and the door and asked innocently, "Where ya going, Lew?"

"Look, I don't wanna have to work you over again!"

"Oh, but you gotta! I wouldn't lie to you. That's the best punch I've ever been hit with. You gotta be kidding if you think you can just walk out of here and leave me all frustrated and up in the air like this!"

Lew threw another sneak punch. But Charlie blocked it with his left forearm and, stepping inside

Lew's guard, threw a vicious, saved-up right cross!

The fist exploded in the gambler's face, and Lew went down, trying to break his fall with his hands and lacerating both on the broken glass all over the floor. He got to his knees, dazed, and stared in wonder at his own bleeding hands.

"Up, up, creep. That was so much fun I'm gonna do it all over again!"

Lew snatched up the broken heel of the beer bottle and threw it at Charlie's face. It hit Charlie's shoulder and smashed against the wall without doing any damage to him.

But Charlie's dancing duck had given Lew time to get his knees under his center of balance and, with a roar of animal rage, the heavy-set hood launched himself like a rocket from the floor.

Lew's head slammed into Charlie's middle as the thug wrapped his waist in a spine-crushing bear hug. The momentum of his lunge sent Charlie crashing seat first into a urinal as Lew hung on. He tried to knee the smaller man and, failing at that, settled for sinking his teeth in Charlie's chest.

After that, it started to get ugly.

The door opened and a man stood there staring open-mouthed as Charlie nodded pleasantly and shoved an elbow in Lew's ear. The man decided he didn't really have to go that badly after all, and went away.

Lew seemed to be trying to push Charlie through the solid concrete wall now. So Charlie kneed him in the groin. Lew groaned in agony as Charlie slid out of his grasp, grabbing Lew by the hair.

He lifted the moaning head within range, threw a saved-up punch, and felt a certain satisfaction as the burly gambler's nose crunched flat under the blow. He hit Lew a couple of licks for old times.

"Come on, Lew," smiled Charlie wolfishly, "You're a man who ought to know when enough is enough!" He kicked, hearing a rib cave in as Lew screamed in mindless agony. Then he said, "Nose and ribs. That should do it. Not as much as you like to dish out. But . . . what's the matter, Lew? Cat got your tongue?"

Hearing nothing but a blubbering groan, Charlie dropped to one knee and took the roll of bills out of Lew's pants with no further discussion. He spit on the downed gambler and mused, "Nose, ribs, and cash. Yeah, I guess that about sets us straight, old buddy."

He got to his feet, stuffing the roll away, just as the door opened again. A different man entered the wash room and froze, taking in the shambles with an uneasy expression. Charlie said, "Man lost the last race and tried to kill himself. I tried to stop him, but he wouldn't listen."

The newcomer marveled, "Jesus! That guy needs an ambulance! *Both* of you need an ambulance!"

"Call one for *him,* if you like," grinned Charlie, adding, "I never felt better in my whole fucking life!"

17

Denny counted out the money for a second time as he and Charlie occupied a booth in the back of the bar. He said, "I can't believe it. Where'd you get all this money, Charlie?"

"I had a good day at the track."

"You must have. But you look like the horses were running on your face, for God's sake!"

Charlie laughed and said, "You know that guy who rolled us that night at the Big G?"

"Lew Whatsisname? Jesus, you didn't run into him again?"

"Sure did. This time, *I rolled him*."

Denny burst out laughing, choked on his beer, and wheezed, "You are too much! I hope you belted him a couple of times for me."

"Didn't have time. But I spit on him for you."

"You spit on him? No shit?"

"Didn't have time to shit, or I would have. I could have done anything I wanted to him. I left that silly son of a bitch in a very civilized condition!"

"I'll have to get you to give me some lessons. I don't think I'd have been able to take Lew. I'm just not tough enough to be a real gambler."

Charlie looked blank and asked, "What are you talking about? There's nothing physical about *gambling*, Bill."

"Come on, we've been beat up, held up, cheated, robbed . . . "

"Yeah, but not by *gamblers*."

"Wasn't Lew a gambler?"

"Shit no. Lew was a *cheat*. You think the Greek or Amarillo Slim would have had us rolled in that parking lot if we'd beaten them fair and square out of every dime they owned? Shit, Nick the Greek lost a *million dollars* in one game, back in the twenties. You think he waited for the winner in a parking lot with a couple of hoods? Shit no. He just took his lumps like a big, brave boy and hoped for better luck the next time."

Denny frowned and said, "Then, it's your theory that it's not gambling that causes all the trouble but the . . . "

"Poor losers," nodded Charlie. "Poor losers and tin-horn hoods who smell the money and can't play fair. Shit, Bill, everything worth having in life is a gamble. The difference is only in how a guy plays the game. Some guys play life like Nick the Greek and others play it like Lew. I mean, you take making a dame. *That's* a gamble, isn't it?"

"I guess it is."

"You know it is. And most guys play it straight.

They bet flowers, books, and candy against a piece of ass, and, if they lose, they lose. Some guys can't *take* losing, and we call them rapists."

"You mean the difference between seduction and rape is how you play the game, for Chrissake?"

"Sure. Politics is the same thing. Hitler and Roosevelt were playing the same game. But Roosevelt was a poker player and Hitler was a thug. Couldn't win at the table. So he waited in the alley with a gun."

"I think I see what you mean. But up to now we've been meeting more Hitlers than Roosevelts, Charlie!"

"That's because there are more shit-heels in life than there ought to be. No matter where you go, or what you do for a living, you're gonna meet a lot of shit-heels, Bill."

"You don't think gambling attracts more than its share?"

"It isn't the *gambling*, it's the *money*. Any place you have a lot of money on the table, you're gonna have a guy like Lew. You play the ponies or the stock market and it's all the same. Some cocksucker's gonna be waiting for you in a parking lot."

"Hey, come on, on *Wall Street?*"

"You think those big businessmen don't cheat at the game? You think they don't shave the dice in Washington? It's like I said, Bill. The whole thing's a game and, as a matter of fact, it's played a lot straighter on a green-felt table. The odds are right there for everyone to see, and I'd rather play

against any professional gambler than I would against a businessman or politician!"

"Then you do think I'll get an honest shake in Reno?"

"Oh, the odds are with the house. But, so what? The odds are always with the house. They don't post the odds in Washington or on Wall Street. But the little guy's always playing against the odds. That's what keeps him a little guy. That's what makes out-and-out gambling so popular. It's the one and only way the little guy figures to come out *big!*"

Denny fingered the bills on the table and muttered, "That's what I'm going to do this time. This time I'm going to come out big."

"Maybe." Charlie shrugged. "Either way we're gonna see a lot of action before we lose *that* roll!"

"I'm not going to lost it, Charlie. I *can't!* I'm *through* with losing!"

"Nobody's ever through with losing, Bill. That's not the way God posts the house odds. Christ, haven't you figured *that* out by now?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The house odds on this planet, sucker. No matter what you win, in the end you lose. You can pile your chips to the moon and ball a million movie stars. But, in the end, what does it get you? Your teeth fall out, you wrinkle up like a prune, and they pat your face flat with a shovel. And that's how the game ends, William my son. Forever and ever in the Big Dark, with God holding all your chips."

"Jesus!" Denny shuddered. "You're a cheerful son of a bitch tonight, aren't you?"

Charlie shrugged and said, "It used to bother me, before I grew up and learned that big boys don't cry. Now I just have a blast. Hell, Bill, I *want* to have chips to the moon and ball a million movie stars!"

"And that's it? That's all you expect out of life?"

"Sure, that's all there is. What are *you* trying to prove, Bill?"

It was a good question.

Charlie saw that Bill Denny had no answer. But he asked anyway. He said, "Tell me about it, Bill. I'm feeling all dewy-eyed and introspective tonight."

"Tell you what, for Chrissake?"

"What's *driving* you, amigo. You're working too fucking *hard* at this to be having *fun!*"

"I just want to *win*, is all."

"Come on, that's not it. We've *got* some *money*, Bill. We've got enough between us to have a real blast. I know some chicks in the Valley who just won't stop and . . . "

"I don't want chicks. I want to *win!* I've *got* to win!"

"You said that. I'm asking why? Why's it so fucking important to you, Bill? You scare me, taking this big joke we're in so goddam *seriously!*"

Denny smiled bitterly and replied, "Sometimes I scare *me,* too. It's a thing I can't explain, Charlie."

"They call it compulsive gambling, on the couch. How'd you get hooked, anyway? You haven't been

at this long. I can tell you haven't been at it long. You had a job and a car when I met you."

Denny started to tell him to shut up. Then he shrugged and said, "I guess it all started with that damned thing at the church."

"You started high rolling in church?"

"You might say that. There was this charity bazaar, see?"

"Oh, yeah. I try to steer clear of church bazaars. The wheels are always fixed."

"This one wasn't. I took my wife and we'd agreed in advance to lose ten dollars, and that was it. I mean, we figured we'd give ten dollars to the church and have a little harmless fun."

"So what happened?"

"We started winning. My wife's lucky number was four, she said. She was born on the fourth day of the fourth month in forty-four. So I bet on number four at the wheel-of-fortune booth and won her a stuffed toy tiger."

"You call that high rolling?"

"There's more. We started betting number four on the other games. We won at chuck-a-luck, and the other wheels and . . . well, everything. There was no stopping number four that night!"

"Yeah, but Bill, *stuffed animals* . . . ?"

"There's more. There was a door prize see? They gave us these tickets when we bought our way in, and my wife's ticket was number four forty-four!"

"You won, of course."

"Five hundred dollars. She was screaming like a

little girl. Screaming and hugging those dumb stuffed toys and . . . well, you know how it feels."

"Boy, do I know how it feels!"

But Denny wasn't listening. Almost to himself, he continued, "We agreed it was a fluke, of course. The five hundred came in handy, with a payment on the house coming up. I'd never bet any real money. Just a couple now and then on the horses with a book in the building where I worked. Then, a week or so after the church bazaar, I spotted this horse in the fourth at Santa Anita. Number four, paying four to one!"

"You bet it, of course."

"Four hundred dollars. I had to stay with that number. You know what I mean?"

"Sure, nobody could have resisted a bet like that. What happened?"

"I won," said Denny bleakly. "I won sixteen hundred dollars in that one race. I'd never won that much money at anything in my whole life! Shit, the most I ever made at one shot in my whole life had been a thousand-dollar advance on a hard-cover book that didn't go anywhere."

"That's when your wife wanted you to quit, right?"

"How'd you guess?"

"No guess. Dames can't gamble. It takes balls to gamble. So, what did she say when you lost it all back?"

"I didn't lose it all back. Not right away. I knew I couldn't go on betting four forever. So I came to my senses and started handicapping. I started

reading the forms like I was boning up to write an article on race horses, and I promised I'd quit as soon as the money we'd won at the church was all gone. I mean, I'd started with a lousy ten spot, so what difference did it make. It was found money, right?"

"Sure. Dames have no sense. What happened?"

"Well, I built that streak up to twelve thousand. And then it started to go sour. I didn't lose it all at once. Just a little at a time. I'd win a race and lose two. The next thing I knew, I was betting with my own money."

"Ouch, that smarts!"

"Yeah, I promised the wife I'd quit. But the track was into me for a couple of hundred of my own money and we couldn't afford it. So I borrowed an advance on my salary and tried to catch up in a poker game. I'm pretty good at poker, you know."

"I know. Only your wife was sore as hell when you blew the advance, right?"

"Wrong. I didn't blow it. I won. I was ahead again. But, funny thing, that's when the arguments started. She kept insisting her mother had told her all gamblers die broke and that I scared her by acting the way I was . . . well, acting. After a while, I stopped coming straight home from the office. I mean, who wants to come home to an argument? Some weeks, I came out ahead and bought her something. Other weeks, we'd sort of get by with the aid of Hamburger Helper. She said I was driving her crazy."

"Gamblers and soldiers have to fly solo. A wife

just gums up the action. A wife can be a problem to a knockaround guy."

"Yeah, well, I don't have that problem, anymore. I don't have anything anymore."

"Shit, Bill. You have *me*, don't you? We'll fly up to Reno and be asshole buddies forever!"

Denny stared soberly at Charlie and said, "Charlie, I've got to go alone."

"Alone? What's this shit about alone? Half of that money is *mine*, amigo."

"I can't play at the same table with you, Charlie. I have to do this thing alone."

"What are you talking about? Are you saying I'm a jinx, for Chrissake?"

"It's not that, exactly. It's just that . . . well, it came to me the other night, driving in my car. It came to me that we've been playing it all wrong."

"How so, wrong?"

"The way we've been balling around together, Charlie. That's all we've been doing. Balling around. I played a . . . a sort of game with my car the other night. I mean, I played it *seriously*."

"Did you win?"

"Yes. I won my life. That's when it came to me that I'm a very serious gambler."

"You're a very serious *nut*, if you ask me!"

"I'm not asking you. I'm telling you. I *know*, Charlie. All the other times you've seen me bet, I was just *hoping* I'd win."

"Well, so what? You won some of the time, didn't you?"

"Some of the time's not good enough, Charlie.

That's how they whittle your stake away. Letting you win *some* of the time. I'm not going up to Reno *hoping* to win, Charlie. I'm going up there to beat those motherfuckers blind!"

"Not with *my* money, you're not! You honestly think I'm about to wave bye-bye to this pile just because you're on some sort of whacked-out hunch? You gotta be kidding, William my son. I said I'd help you get a real stake together. I didn't say I was about to set up a trust fund for you!"

"Charlie, this time I *know* I'm going to *win*."

"Yeah? You get a hot flash from the stars or something?"

"I just know. I've got this feeling, now that I know how it's done."

"Look, you feel all the feelings you want. But I worked too hard for this bread to let you blow it unless I'm part of the action."

"It won't work if we're partners, Charlie. I've go to do this thing alone."

Charlie shrugged and said, "Okay, I'll go along and *watch*."

"Bullshit! You'll insist on getting into the game and that will be the end of that."

"I won't," insisted Charlie. "Cross my heart and hope to die. I'll just stand there and watch this magic act of yours. I think you're full of shit, but I love you."

"You can't even watch," insisted Denny, adding "I'll let you come to Reno with me. But you've got to promise to stay the hell away from me. I can't win if you're any part of the action."

"Man, you are too much! I'll bet you undress in the dark, too. I mean, how's it gonna hurt if I just stand there and watch? You think you're gonna play against Amarillo Slim in a dim-lit closet? There'll be at least five hundred people in that fucking casino, Bill."

"But I won't know any of them. I'll be playing alone. Just me against the house. Don't you see what I mean?"

"I see I ought to have my head examined. But you're talking so wild you just have to be on to something."

"You'll do it."

"Well, what the hey, I'll chase dames, or play at another table or something. Between us, we've got enough to play in two different clubs."

"We can't split the stake, Charlie. I've got to bet it all. Just me, alone against the house."

"Oh shit, now you *are* talking nonsense. Look, I'll just take a couple of hundred and . . . "

"No!," said Denny flatly, "I've got to have it all. All in one stake. Go for broke."

"You *are* crazy! You've flipped out of your gourd! You really think I'm gonna go all the way up to Reno and just stand there with egg on my face while you lose my money?"

"I didn't want you to come. Coming was your idea."

"You *must* be on amphetamines. These are very bad vibrations. I'm taking my money out of the pot, Bill. You do what you want with what you raised, and I'll do what I want with my share."

"It's too late," said Denny flatly, placing his hand over the money on the table. "I told you I'd split whatever I win in Reno with you. But this money is now in action. I *mean* it, Charlie."

Charlie stared, open-mouthed, and gasped, "Hey, are you getting physical with *me,* Bill?"

"If I have to."

He sounded like he meant it.

Charlie's eyes narrowed, thoughtfully, and he said, "I think I can take you, Bill."

"You'll have to kill me," replied Denny, in a deadly serious tone.

Charlie stared at him soberly. Then he grinned and said, "I bet I'd have to, at that." Then he laughed. "Shit, it's only money. When do we leave for Reno?"

18

The casino was running full blast when Bill Denny and Charlie Waters arrived from the airport. The casino was always running at full blast, day and night. The two of them elbowed their way through the crowd until they reached the part that Denny was looking for.

The casino was equipped with every known gaming device, from ever-so-sophisticated roulette to ghetto-alley craps. But the action they'd come for was low-ball stud. Low-ball stud is not a game for tourists, and none of the men seated at the roped-off table were. All the seats were taken, and the players were all male. They had the sleek, bored look of men who know how it feels to play with a quarter million in the pot. Charlie sized a couple up as well-known pros. At least one was a thief, and another was a well-known Hollywood actor. All of them looked like they knew what they were doing there.

Bill Denny wasn't looking at the players. He caught the eye of the dealer and motioned, silently, that he wanted in. The dealer looked around the table and shrugged, dismissing the newcomer. All the seats were taken, and Denny would have to wait until one of the big boys had had enough action for the night.

Charlie leaned toward Denny and whispered, "The actor's the only one who figures to drop out soon. He's a spoiled brat with more money than he knows what to do with. The game's not important to him, and he'll be wanting pussy in a little while."

"What about the others?"

"You see the hustler in the leather jacket? He's in over his head. Small-time thief with a recent score burning a hole in his pocket. He won't have the balls to try anything with those high rollers. But he might think he can play mechanic with *you*. Watch his ass."

"What about the steel-rimmed glasses. He looks like a school teacher."

"He's not. He's a pro. Figures to be the tightest player in the game. I figure him a percentage player. No moves. No flair. Probably never wins or loses much in any one game. But he comes out ahead in the long run and lives simply. You might be able to bluff him, once. Behind those glasses, he's reading *you* right now."

"You think he knows we're sizing him up?"

"Sure. I told you he was a pro, didn't I? Only edge I can give you on him is that he won't bluff on anything big. When that mousy bastard starts to raise, it's time for you to *fold,* baby!"

"Okay, what about the Texas yahoo in the big hat?"

"Negative on Texas yahoo. He's another pro."

"You're kidding! He looks like a country boy."

"That's what Dick Nixon thought Sam Ervin was. There really otta be a law about these simple country boys. He's a bluffer. But he knows what he's doing and has the bread behind him to back a lot of calls. He's gonna be a son of a bitch to beat."

"I'll beat him. What's the best way to play him?"

"I dunno. He's good and bad for you, see? The good part is that he'll keep putting it on the table for you when you start to win. The bad part is that he sends too *much* money into you."

Denny nodded and said. "Which could knock me out of the game before I got started, eh? What about that Chinese-looking guy?"

Charlie studied the expressionless Oriental and

said, "I can't read him. Let's just say he's inscrutable and let it go at that!"

"What about Mister Five, the bald-headed guy?"

"Either a pro or a rich guy who plays every day. A guy who likes the game. Figures to have the rhythm of the plays down pat. If he's got any real money behind him, he could be trouble."

"And six? The smoothie with the manicured nails and all those lovely chips in front of him?"

"Mister Six is *real* trouble. You got to know he's the best in the game. Everything about the guy's style tells you that."

Denny stared soberly and muttered, "His *chips* tell me *that*. He must be winning a small fortune. That has to be thirty thousand worth of chips in front of him."

"Yeah, a real high roller. He dosn't miss a trick. I'm sure he bought in for quite a bit. With a fortress of chips in front of you, you become a man to be feared."

"He's like a fox sitting there, or maybe a spider. I'll bet he knows everybody's weakness at the table."

"No bet. That's why he's the best. Try and stay clear of that bastard when you play. As soon as you sit down he's gonna be watching you, trying to figure out what you had for breakfast. He'll want to know if you've got money, if you're hurting for money, or just sitting in for amusement. If you're a male Caucasian wanted for bum checks at Thriftymart, he'll know it before you tell him. He'll be looking for any tell you have, so stay cool and maybe, just maybe, you can throw him off balance.

He won't bet his carfare home until he's got you figured out. So, for Chrissake, don't give him the chance to figure shit."

"Okay, I have to psych the high roller. What do you think about Mister Seven, the young stud in the flashy threads?"

"El punko. Another rich kid with too much money and trying to act like a grown-up. He probably saw *The Cincinnati Kid* and thinks he's Steve McQueen. He's your best bet to bust out. Play him for his daddy's dough before you tangle with any of the others. It's those others you have worry about. Your only edge is that they don't know you. Keep it that way and you have an outside chance, Bill."

The man Charlie had cased as a small-time hood lost his last chip and got up from the table. The dealer glanced up at Denny with a curious look, and Charlie said, "You're on, baby. I hope you know what you're getting into."

"Okay, where will you be, Charlie?"

"With ten dollars in the world? I won't be far!"

"Okay, but don't watch this. You promised to stay out of my action, remember?"

"Oy, do I remember. I must have been out of my skull."

Denny sat down and accepted the dealer's nod with a barely perceptible nod of his own. He was aware of the others looking him over and swept his own eyes around the table, staring them down. The high roller smiled at him, and Bill smiled back. It was not a friendly smile. Bill Denny was in this game to *win*.

Charlie Waters turned away from the crap table with a weary little smile. Ten dollars didn't go very far in Reno these days. A hard but pretty woman with a brittle paint-job smiled at him and asked, "What game do you play?"

"Don't know, yet. I'm looking for action."

"Really? What kind of action?"

"Any kind there is, doll?"

"You have a room here?"

"No, do you?"

"Mmmm, you do come on strong, don't you? But I like your style. Why don't we go up to my room and get ourselves out of this ridiculous vertical position?"

"I dunno," mused Charlie, undressing her with his eyes. Then he shrugged and said, "Sure, why not. How much will you pay me?"

"Pay *you?,*" blinked the woman.

"Sure, you don't think you're gonna get it for free, do you? This is *Reno,* doll!"

The woman laughed and said, "I get it. You're putting me on. Okay, if we have to discuss the finances so early, I usually get . . . well . . . "

"Twenty dollars," cut in Charlie. "I don't usually do it for twenty. But, what the hey, I like you."

The woman blinked again and said, "Now, wait a minute. Let me get this straight, you're asking *me* to pay *you?"*

"Sure. Twenty dollars for a quick lay. Thirty-five if you want me to put it in the brown. I don't rim, though. A boy has to have *some* standards, see?"

"This had to be the weirdest conversation I've ever had in my life! You don't seem to understand, handsome. I am the *whore*. *You* is the *whoree*."

"I'm afraid I don't see it that way." Charlie shrugged. "You asked me, I didn't ask you. The one who asks has to pay. The one who's asked sets the price. You can't go wrong for twenty dollars, you know. I'm hung like a goddam horse!"

"You have to be crazy. But now I'm curious. Are you actually trying to tell me that girls pay *you?*"

"Yes. I'm really a model. But, what the hey, a boy has to eat, you know."

"You must think you're the bee's knees in bed."

"I've never had any complaints."

"Come on. No woman has to pay for sex."

"Why not? Men pay, don't they?"

"Damn it, it's not the same thing!"

"You bet your sweet bippy it's not. A guy has to work a lot harder at it, you know."

The painted woman stared at him and mused, "By God, I think you really mean it. I'll bet there *are* some women who'd pay a stud like you, at that."

"I got a thousand dollars one night. Faded movie actress. She was old and kind of kinky. But it wasn't too bad. She was very gentle with me, and generous, too."

"This I gotta see. Come on. Let's go to my room. I'll give it to you free, just to see if you're as good as you say you are."

"You have to be kidding."

"No, really. It's slow tonight, anyway, and, sometimes I do it just for kicks, so . . . "

"What about the money?," insisted Charlie. "I'm not about to take off my pants for less than twenty dollars."

"*You* are *weird!* I'll bet you're gay! I'll bet you couldn't satisfy me if you tried!"

"Unless you pay me twenty dollars, you'll never know, will you?"

"Who *wants* to know, you freak? That's all I ever meet in this place. A bunch of fucking freaks!"

Charlie laughed, enjoying the put-on, and suggested, "Why don't you cruise on, then. I can see there's no profit in this conversation for either of us."

"What's the matter with me? Have I broken out in spots or something?"

"No, you're very pretty."

"Then, what's the problem? I told you I'd do it just for laughs, damn it!"

"And I told you I only did it for money," insisted Charlie, adding, "Free samples are all right for you, maybe. But I'm a man. I'm only good for eight or ten times a night, and I might meet a real spender here."

The whore said, "Shit," and turned away for saner action. Charlie watched her go regretfully. She had a nice rear end under that too-tight dress, and she looked like she knew how to move it, too. Maybe he should have taken her up on the free sample. He took a step after her, knowing that was what she expected of him. Then he shook his head and said, "Nuts. Nuts to that! Once you start a bluff, you gotta bluff it all the way."

19

Across the room, the hand was in full swing. The four players still betting were the playboy, the Texas yahoo, the bald regular, and Bill. The others had folded, and Bill was aware of the size of his remaining stake. It had taken all that he and Charlie had raised to push his luck this far.

The playboy sad, "Deuce, jack, six!"

The Texan said, "deuce, four, eight."

The bald regular muttered, "Ace, seven, six."

And that left Denny.

He said, "Four, five, seven. I'll bet eighty."

The playboy said, "Call," and pushed his chips in the pot.

The regular nodded and said, "I'll call, too."

The Texan studied his hand and mused, "Well, now, son, I know I got mine made. But I don't know about you."

He thought some more and added, "Shoot, I *came* to *gamble!* Why don't we just jack up the pot and let's see what happens?"

The Texan shoved a massive pile of chips forward, doubling the pot, and leaned back, grinning like a weasel in a hen house.

Denny didn't hesitate as he said, "I raise," and shoved in the chips it took. His heart was pounding and his mouth was dry. But he couldn't let them see it. In a desperately casual tone, he said to the playboy, "That's a hundred and sixty to you."

The playboy said, "Yeah," but he didn't move any chips.

Denny was aware of eyes looking at him and glanced up. The high roller was staring at him thoughtfully. Denny nodded and met his gaze, dead level. The high roller was onto him. Denny knew the high roller knew how tight he was playing. But there was something worried in the older man's eyes. Was it fear or just caution? The high roller looked like he was having trouble with his computer, and he didn't like it much. The high roller was a man who played to win, and to win you have to know what you're doing and, more important, what the other guy is doing. The high roller couldn't quite read Denny, and it was getting to him.

The playboy still hesitated, and the Texan opined, "Gotta make a decision one way or the other, sonny. It's only money."

The playboy gulped and said weakly, "I call."

"Call," snapped the bald regular flatly.

The Texan grinned and said, "Now we are playing cards, gents! Who wants to pump it up one time and see what this is all about?"

Denny felt a big furry cat get up and turn around inside his stomach as he said casually, "I raise."

The Texan smiled at the playboy and asked, "You in, sonny?"

The playboy blurted, "How in hell can you just keep raising to his hand when he has you beat on the board?"

The Texan said, "You just play your game and I'll play mine, sonny. What's it gonna be?"

"I fold," sighed the playboy. He peevishly shoved his cards into the middle of the table. Then he said, "Jesus Christ, can I get a drink in this dump?"

The dealer snapped his metal cricket at a passing cocktail waitress as the bald regular mused, "I call."

The Texan stared at Denny for a time before he said, "I guess you're trying to tell me something, son. Reckon I can only call, this time."

The playboy blurted, "*Now* he just calls. No more raises from the State of Texas. It figures!"

The others ignored his outburst as the dealer completed the hand by dealing the regular a queen, the Texan a five, and a seven to Denny. The folded playboy asked the dealer, "Let me see the next card, will you?"

The dealer hesitated. Then the Texan said, "Shoot, show the child the card. He ain't in the game no more."

The dealer looked around at the others and, getting no objection, lifted the card to where the playboy could see the corner. The playboy went dead white, and, when he didn't say anything, the

Texan joshed, "Would have won, had you stayed in, wouldn't you?"

The dealer told the Texan, "You're low."

The Texan nodded and said, "Well, mebbe I'd best make a little wager here," and shoved more chips in the pot.

"Raise," said Denny bleakly.

The bald regular sighed and said, "This is getting too rich for my blood. I fold."

The Texan and Bill Denny were alone in the game.

The Texan grinned and said, "Well, I reckon this is it, son. I call you. Whadaya got?"

"Rough seven," said Denny, trying to control his hands as he spread his cards on the table.

The Texan sighed morosely, and said, "I got an eight. You're low ball by one point, son."

As Denny raked the chips toward his side of the table, the bald regular muttered, "Shit, I had a seven-five! I folded the winner!"

"Don't win by folding with the winning hand," observed the Texan cheerfully. "The idea of this here game is to *play* the winning hand, see?"

Denny's eyes met those of the high roller, who grinned and said, "You played that very well, friend." Then, to the dealer, he said flatly, "From here on, friend, I don't want you to flash any more cards until the hand is completely over. Let's deal the next one, shall we?"

The painted lady of the evening found Charlie watching Denny's game from a distance and mused,

"Your friend seems to be winning. That is your friend who just took off his jacket, isn't it?"

"He's not my friend, he's my lover," grinned Charlie, "And look at that mother lover play! Look at the chips he's piled up! I'll bet he could take Nick the Greek with that much money to hit people with."

"He's kind of cute. Does he charge for it, too?"

"Who, Bill? No, he just pimps for me on the side. Most of the time, he gambles. Have you ever *seen* a mother that can play cards like that?"

"Listen, I know this is crazy. But you've really got my curiosity up. I mean, what do you *do* to these women who pay you?"

"No big deal. I'm just the best lay in the Western World. I think I have a glandular problem. That's what Liz told me, anyway."

"Oh, come on, you never balled Liz Taylor, for God's sake!"

"It wasn't for God's sake, it was for a hundred bucks. What do you think it was broke her and Richard Burton up?"

"You're full of shit, you know that? I mean, you are really full of shit!"

"It all started with my stepmother, see? That's what got me into this life. My stepmother seduced me when I was only ten years old. My father was away a lot, and she used to catch me alone and ravage me, every chance she got. Then the next thing I knew, she was passing me around to her friends. I thought at first it was all in fun. I was young and naïve in those days. It was a long time

before I realized they were actually *paying* for my body."

"Your friend just won another pot."

"He sure did. Ain't he beautiful? Anyway, I was telling you about how I got put out on the turf by my own stepmother."

"I've heard the story. It's *usually* a *girl* telling it."

"Okay, I'll level with you. I just like to screw, see? I mean, I was trying to break in, in Hollywood, and all these actresses and script girls were passing me around, and I thought, what the hey, as long as they all want to ball me, I might as well start getting *paid* for it. One thing led to another and, well, the next thing you know, I was like you see me now. I've still got my looks. One of these days, when I've saved up enough money to go home to Willow Bend . . . "

"Oh, stuff a sock in it, you silly ass!"

"There's a girl in Willow Bend who's waiting for me, see? She owns a filling station, and all these years she's been waiting for me to come to my senses. Someday, I might go back to her. But what if my past should catch up with me?"

"No shit, I've really got the hots for you," the whore cut in, adding, "I don't know what it is about you. But I've just *got* to know what makes you so damned sure of yourself."

"You can find out, for twenty dollars."

"Don't be an asshole. I must be crazy, giving in to you for free."

"You mean you want me to do it for love? Love is for johns, or is it janes? I am a businessman,

doll. I'd lose my professional standing if I started handing out free samples."

"You really think I'd give you twenty dollars?"

"Why not? I told you I was worth it, didn't I?"

"Do you give head?"

"Doesn't everybody? Giving head is common courtesy. I only charge extra for sodomy."

"You goof! I'm almost tempted. I swear to God, I'm almost tempted to take you up on it."

"What can you lose? Nine out of ten people are worth going to bed with, and the tenth is worth it just for the novelty."

"This is crazy."

"Yeah, but you can't resist the idea, can you?"

The woman laughed and said, "Okay. Twenty bucks. But baby, you'd better be good!"

The Oriental called Bill Denny, and the playboy went along with a weak call of his own. The pot had grown to dangerous proportions again, and the others were backing off. The cautious man in the steel-rimmed glasses could be safely dismissed as a serious gambler. He had a way of folding before the pot got hairy. The Texan and the bald regular were starting to treat Denny with kid gloves, and the high roller was still studying him, his computer going tic-tic-tic behind his pleasant mask. This hand was between the playboy and the Oriental, now. And Denny said, "I raise."

The playboy folded. The Oriental said, "No raise. I just called. What do you have?"

Denny spread his cards, a six, four, ace, and two deuces.

The Oriental shrugged and, throwing in his losing hand with no outward display of emotion, said, "You're low ball."

As Denny raked in the chips, the playboy leaned confidentially to the Oriental and whispered, "What did you have?"

The Oriental ignored him coldly. El punko was starting to get on everybody's nerves with his childish behavior. But, as the Texan observed, his money was just as green as the next john's, and he still seemed to have a lot of it.

The dealer started another hand, and this time the high roller sweetened the pot with a thousand-dollar open bid. His eyes met Denny's, and Denny thought, "This is it. He's coming in for the kill." But his eyes never wavered as they met those of the pro, and for a second time Denny saw uncertainty there, like the barely glimpsed form of a shark in murky water. A shark who's seen the bait but isn't sure he can really break the line. Denny resisted an impulse to count his chips. He knew he had enough to play this hand. He was dead if he lost. But he counted out a thousand and shoved it into the pot.

The dealer said, "That's too high for openers, gents. House rules won't allow that much for openers."

The high roller shrugged and removed two-thirds of his stack from the pot. It had been a psych job. The high roller would know the house rules. He'd only wanted to see if the others were ready

to lose that sort of money, and his bluff had been called.

The high roller's trick had been a good one. The other players had been badly shaken by the ploy, and Denny went in for the kill, his face a frozen mask of boredom as he raised again and again. The others dropped out, one by one, until only he and the high roller were left. His opponent raised, driving the pot into the stratosphere as even the Texan whistled at its size.

Between winning and losing, Denny had amassed a thousand more than he'd started with. But most of it was on the table now. If he raised one more time, he'd have it *all* out there.

Through numb lips, Denny said, "Raise."

If the high roller raised in turn, Bill Denny was dead. He didn't have the chips to raise again, and the high roller was still dug in behind that fortress of his.

The high roller stared at Denny with friendly mockery in his eyes. He said, "That's about all the chips you have, isn't it, friend?"

"You want to raise, I'll buy some more," said Denny, taking out his empty billfold. The high roller stared at him knowingly. But Denny realized he *didn't* know. Denny had caught *him* bluffing with that hot-shot opening. The high roller had no way of knowing whether Denny knew the house rules or not.

Again the shark turned away from the bait as the high roller shrugged and said, "I call. What have you got?"

"Rough six," said Denny, laying out his cards.

The high roller said, "You're low ball. But I can't help wondering what would have happened had I raised the ante one more time."

Raking in his winnings, Denny said, "You'll never know, now, will you?"

20

"Wow, you *are* something," murmured the whore, snuggling closer to Charlie's naked flesh in the murky hotel room. Charlie yawned and said, "Between the two of us, we are such stuff as legends are made of. But I've got to split, doll."

"So soon? Can't we do it one more time for the road? You have such a lovely body, Charlie."

"I dig yours, too, doll. But I gotta see how my main man is doing downstairs. You should be thinking of getting back to your beat, too, shouldn't you?"

"I think you've ruined me for the night. You really are hung like a horse, aren't you? You know, I didn't really think you could make me come."

"So, why'd you give me the twenty dollars?"

"Beats the shit out of me. Women are just curious, I guess."

"Any complaints? I don't give refunds, you know."

"Just shut up and give me a cigarette, will you?"

Charlie fumbled for his shirt on the bedpost and took out a pack of Benson & Hedges. He lit two of them, placed one between the painted lips of the satisfied whore and sat up, saying, "I gotta go now."

"So go. Who's stopping you?"

Charlie dressed with the experienced speed of a knockaround guy as the woman watched him, heavy-lidded. He kicked on his loafers and stood up, saying, "See you around the campus, doll. Hey, what's the matter?"

"Matter? Nothing's the matter."

"Then why are you looking at me so funny? I can't figure whether you're about to laugh or cry."

The woman wasn't sure, either. But she said, "I'm laughing, Charlie. What we just did was pretty kinky, you know?"

"It was an experience, wasn't it?"

She suddenly doubled up with laughter and lay in a nude knot on the bed, quivering with . . . amusement?

Charlie said, "Hell, it wasn't all *that* funny. What are you so amused about, for Chrissake?"

"It just hit me," she gasped weakly. "It just hit me that I took you!"

"*You* took *me?* That's a *switch.* You gave me the twenty I asked for, didn't you?"

"Yeah, that's what's so funny. Didn't you know, Charlie?"

"Know what, for God's sake?"

"Your price, you idiot! Didn't you know the going price for a quick lay in this town is *fifty* dollars?"

Charlie ran into Denny in the bar and shouted, "Hey, old buddy, how're you doing?"

"I'm ahead."

"No shit? So what are you doing away from the table?"

"We agreed to take a break. Nobody's had time to take a piss for hours and some of them are strung out."

"Game starts again with the same guys?"

"Yeah. They love me too much to start without me."

"Crazy! How much are we into them for?"

Denny laughed and said, "Eleven thousand. I'm killing them!"

Charlie gasped and said, "You won eleven thousand? Eleven thousand *dollars,* for Chrissake?"

Denny nodded and Charlie blurted, "Bill, let's get the fuck *out* of here!"

"Don't be silly. This was just the first blood. There's fifteen or twenty grand to be had in that game yet."

"Famous last words. Fade in an hour later and you're broke."

"Not this time, Charlie. I'm not going to let it happen!"

"That's what General Custer kept telling me. Come on, Bill. With eleven big ones, we could last for months at the tracks. And we know what we're doing with *horses!*"

"I know what I'm doing here. Who's the broad I saw you watching me with? I don't know if I like this, Charlie. I'm in there doing all the work, and you're out here making like a playboy."

Charlie knew he was trying to change the subject. But he grinned and said, "I was working, too. She damn near broke my back, just now."

"You got some of that? I didn't think you had enough money."

"You'd never believe me if I told you what just happened," laughed Charlie. "But I'm running short again. I don't think the baccarat dealer likes me. I just blew everything I had over there. That reminds me. Half of that eleven grand is *mine!*"

"I *can't,* Charlie. I need the whole stake to get back in the game. You were right about the Texan and the high roller. You can't play against them with pin money."

"You can give me a grand and still have ten to beat them over the head with, dammit!"

"I need it all. The pots are averaging a grand in that game."

"Well, give me *something*, you high-rolling asshole. I've got four fucking dollars in the whole fucking world!"

Denny reached in his pocket and took out a rumpled ten-spot. He gave it to Charlie and said, "That's it. That's all I have of what we started with. The money I won stays in chips."

Charlie grimaced at the ten spot and marveled, "Oh, wow! Ten whole dollars. I don't know where I'll ever be able to spend so much money. The drinks only cost three dollars in this joint!"

"So have three drinks and play the rest on the slots. I've got to get back to the action, Charlie."

"Bill, this is crazy! You gotta quit while you're ahead."

"I don't want to be ahead. I want to *take* them. I'm going to chew them up and spit them out, Charlie! I didn't come all this way to quit while I'm ahead. I'm going for broke!"

"Bananas! You've gone completely bananas! We're gonna have to hitchhike back to L.A., you jerk!"

"No," said Denny flatly. "Not this time, Charlie. This time I'm going to *win*."

He turned and walked back towards the roped-off low-ball game. Charlie watched him soberly. Then he shrugged and headed for the bar. Bill was going to blow it. Charlie knew he was going to blow it. It was up to him now. Somehow, Charlie had to win enough to buy their bus tickets back to where a guy had a sporting chance.

Back at the game, a new man had taken the Hollywood actor's place. Denny cased the chips the new man had bought and dismissed him as small fry. He'd forgotten how few chips he'd started with himself.

The Oriental picked his cards up, casually. No expression on his placid face. The playboy didn't seem to like his cards. But he never seemed to like his cards. The only thing the playboy had going for him was his money. He had a lot of money, and Denny was going to take as much of it as the law would allow.

The tight-percentage player was still in, but no longer a danger. Denny had too much to be whittled down by a man who settled for a few points a hand.

The bald regular was still dangerous. He hadn't lost enough to lose his nerve, and the guy was good. He'd settled in for the night and was waiting to pounce, with the deceptive grace of a fat man, as soon as one of the others made a serious slip.

The Texan was easing off, too smart to try anything wild, now that the others had had time to size him up. The Texan might try an outrageous bluff with the new man. But Denny had taught him some manners, and the Texan was taking his cards seriously.

The Oriental bet with a deuce. The playboy folded with a queen. The mousy percentage player called with a seven, and the bald regular shrugged and folded before any real money was in this pot.

The high roller raised a hundred, holding a five, and the new man quickly folded. Denny was right about the new man. He hadn't brought enough in to want to lose it that fast.

Denny held a six. He smiled tightly, and raised two hundred. The survivors each shoved their chips forward. The pot was now starting to be worth the action.

The dealer passed out more cards and Denny held a nine. The Texan smiled at his hand and raised another hundred. The Oriental folded. The high roller hesitated, stared thoughtfully at Denny, and said, "I fold, too."

That left it between Denny, the Texan, and the mousy little percentage player.

The percentage player shoved two neatly counted stacks of chips and said quietly, "I raise two hundred."

Denny saw the Texan was still in and wondered if it wouldn't be smart, this time, to fold. The percentage player didn't look like a man who liked to bluff, and Denny held a nine. A seven or eight would beat him, and eight was an easy hand to draw.

The Texan called. Denny matched his call and the dealer dealt the final cards.

The Texan threw down a queen with a disgusted look and sighed, "Whores will be the death of me yet. I fold."

The percentage player glanced at Denny, and Denny said, "I raise two hundred."

"I call," shrugged the percentage player.

Denny spread his nine and said, "I hope for your sake you've got an eight."

The percentage player didn't return his friendly smile as he said flatly, "I was holding a seven."

Denny watched his opponent rake in the pot and thought, "I was stupid. I should have known he wouldn't hang in without a damned good hand!"

Across the table, the high roller was staring at him thoughtfully. Denny knew the high roller thought he'd been stupid. Okay, so what did that mean? It meant the high roller was liable to be less wary of him in the future. Things were looking up. Aloud, Denny said to the dealer, "Let's have

some action, huh? It's getting late, and I have to win that last one back."

The dealer didn't answer as he started to shuffle the pack. The high roller said, "If you don't mind, I'd like to have a new pack. That deuce the Chinaman held has a bent corner."

The dealer cricketed for a fresh pack without answering. He probably knew there was nothing showing on the backs of any cards. The high roller was trying to psych them again. But it wasn't going to work. Denny had the high roller's pattern, now. It might have worried the others. But Denny felt just fine.

21

The woman betting against the house at the black-jack table was holding a weak hand and a gorgeous pair of tits. Charlie was staring down the front of her dress. But she thought he was interested in her cards. So she asked, "What do you think? Do I keep these or ask them to hit me again?"

"Do you believe in love at first sight?," asked Charlie.

"I believe in winning this hand. What should I do?"

"Stand pat. A face card will wipe you out."

The woman smiled weakly at the blackjack dealer and said, uncertainly, "I'll stay."

The dealer didn't answer until after he'd hit. Then he muttered, "Twenty-one. House Wins."

"You son of a bitch," the woman said to Charlie.

"Lucky at cards, unlucky at love," shrugged Charlie, trying to place an arm around her waist as he added, "What do you say we have a drink and talk our future over, sweetheart?"

"Get away from me, you creep! I should have let him hit me again."

"Creep? Is that any way to talk to the man you're planning to run away to Tahiti with?"

"I'm planning to call a house dick if you don't leave me alone, you silly son of a bitch!"

Charlie shrugged and moved on. Who the hell wanted to take a woman of his own to Tahiti? Besides, the tits were too good to be real. They were probably silicone, anyway.

The angry woman's eyes were still burning a hole in the back of Charlie's head when he spotted Denny in the crowd. He scampered over to Denny and puppy-dogged." *Qué pasa,* amigo? I was just leaving for Tahiti. Have they cleaned you out yet?"

"They tried," smiled Denny grimly. "The high roller and the Texas yahoo seemed to be gunning for me together. So I packed it in. No way in the world to beat the two of them with the chips they were beating me over the head with."

"Oh, Christ! How much did they take you for?"

"They didn't. I got another seven thousand ahead and decided it was getting to be too much work. I was losing the rhythm of the game. Then this new man started betting wild and . . . "

"You won eleven, then seven and . . . Jesus H. Christ! That's eighteen thousand dollars, Bill!"

"Yeah, I told you I packed it in while I stood the winner."

"You're beautiful," Charlie gasped, holding out his hand for a slap as he added, "I've never told this to another boy, Bill. But you are beautiful and I love you!"

Denny slapped his hand gently and muttered, "Yeah."

Charlie frowned. "What's the matter? Don't you feel good?"

"I'm all right, Charlie."

"Yeah? Well, you don't *look* all right. You look . . . sick!"

"I'm okay, I tell you."

"Okay, if you say so. What do you say we collect our cash and run like thieves in the night!"

"No," said Denny flatly.

Charlie frowned and said, "No? What's this *no* shit? You're talking crazy, Bill. You're not going to try at anything else, are you?"

"That's it, Charlie. I lost the rhythm of low-ball stud. But I can still win more money at the other tables. I'm hot, Charlie. I know it. I can taste it!"

Charlie started to protest. But Denny was headed for the blackjack table now. Charlie shuddered and fell in at his side, whispering. "At least let me have

enough for the bus tickets. You can't bet *all* of that bread!"

But Denny wasn't listening. He bellied up to the table and asked the dealer, "What's your limit?"

"Five hundred dollars."

Denny placed a five-hundred-dollar bet and the dealer cricketed for the pit bosses. Two house men started sauntering over and the dealer called, "The gentleman wants to bet the limit." One of the pit bosses nodded. But the action had not gone unnoticed in the crowd. Any real bet brings the vultures flocking, and a crowd gathered around the table. Bill Denny smiled at one of the pit bosses with a tight, private smile and, uncertainly, the pit boss smiled back. Charlie said, "They seem to like you. Look at them. Grinning like a pack of fucking wolves!"

Denny said, "Charlie, you've got to beat it."

"Bill, we agreed to stop at fifteen grand. What the fuck are you *doing* to us?"

"Charlie, I know what I'm doing. Just go along with me for a little longer. But go along with me someplace else. I can't win with you standing here!"

"Aw, you can't ask me to split when you're betting eighteen grand! What the fuck will I *do* with myself?"

"Just do what you've been doing. But do it someplace else. I can't explain it, Charlie. But I've got to do this thing *alone!*"

"Jesus, we're having a religious experience already! I don't get it, Bill. You been reading a horoscope or something like that?"

"Something like that, Charlie. Run along and play in the traffic, for God's sake!"

"I don't suppose you'd care to give me some of my money before I split?"

"I'm betting it *all*, Charlie."

"Silly of me, wasn't it? Can anybody tell me the way to Shangri-la? I hear that nobody loses in Shangri-la. The guru is very firm on that point in Shangri-la."

"Beat it, Charlie. I mean it!"

Charlie pushed away through the growing crowd, muttering to himself. The whole thing was bananas. Behind him, Charlie heard a low gasp from the crowd. That could only mean one thing. The silly prick with his money had won. The crowd was silent when a sucker lost. What in God's name was Denny onto? And, more important, why couldn't *he* be on it? The house had been robbing him blind all night.

Charlie wandered into a corridor lined with slot machines. A determined woman was playing three slots at a time, holding a paper cup full of nickels. As Charlie approached, the woman hit and the jackpot overflowed her paper cup, sending a cascade of coins to the floor. Charlie helped her gather her winnings, palming a couple of nickels in the process. She thanked him, dull-eyed, and proceeded to feed the jackpot back to the machines. Charlie tried his own luck and quickly lost the coins he fed to the unfeeling robot house men.

It just wasn't his night.

Tapped out, Charlie found the guest lobby and

stood with his hands in his pocket, watching the other guests watch a big game on a monstrous color TV. The others watching the game had a Mafia feel about them, and Charlie was suddenly aware that there was money in the game.

It was a night football game. The quarterback uncorked a bomb and his wide receiver, who had his opposing player beat by a good five yards, let the pass slide through his frantic fingers. The TV announcer—it sounded like Howard Cosell—said, "No excuse there. He just pure and simple butterfingered that pass."

A seated man with a family resemblance to the late Frank Costello moaned, "Last week he couldn't miss a ball. . . . Now look at the rat bastard!"

"He otta be stuffed in cement and buried in the Jersey Meadows," said Charlie, "But I'll bet Green Bay even for three dollars in the second half. Who wants it?"

Nobody bothered to answer.

The announcer said, "With twelve seconds left in the half, that looms awfully big."

"Come on," insisted Charlie. "Don't none of you guys want to take my money?"

The one who looked like Costello snorted and said, "You got five hundred to lose, sport?"

"Uh, not at the moment." He didn't have the three, either. But he didn't think anyone would kill him for welshing on a three dollar bet, and he was closest to the door.

"I tip with hundred-dollar bills, sonny," shrugged

the heavy-set hood, adding, "Why don't you go play the slots?"

There was a low rumble of amusement, and Charlie didn't like it. But the guy with the bulge under his pin stripe was probably the loud mouth's muscle. So what the hey. Charlie shrugged and watched the rest of the game in silence.

The hell of it was, he'd have won, if he'd had any money to bet.

Charlie went looking for Denny and found him at the roulette wheel. He eased in behind him and whispered, "Have you gone ape? *Nobody* wins at *roulette!*"

"Shut up," said Denny, tight-lipped. "I just took the black jack table for another four thousand before they closed me out."

Charlie added it up in his head and marveled, "You mean we have twenty-two thousand? They'll actually give us twenty-two thousand for those fucking chips? We've got to get *out* of here!"

The wheel was slowing down, and the little white ball was slowly bouncing from one slot to another. It seemed to settle safely on twenty, black, then suddenly jumped over the low metal partition and came to rest.

The croupier called, "Twenty-one, red!"

Denny swore and said, "I was on twenty. *Now Now* look what you've done, Charlie!"

"*I* did that? I thought it was a magnet under the wheel!"

"Get away from me, Charlie. I was *winning* until *you* showed up!"

"Come on, Bill."

"*Leave*, damn you!"

"But I didn't *do* anything! Will you stop being such a superstitious king-sized bore?"

"Leave. I mean it."

"It won't make no *difference*, Bill!"

"Yes it will. I can beat them. I *know* I can beat them! But not with *you* here!"

Charlie shrugged and drifted away, morosely, to a nearby table that was not in use at the moment. He was within sight of the action, but surely far enough out of range to be giving off bad vibrations. A woman started to press past and Charlie asked, "Where are you going, doll? Did anybody ever tell you how much you look like Kim Novak?"

"I hear there's a big winner at the roulette wheel," smiled the woman.

Charlie shook his head and said, "I know him. He's gay. Stick with me and I'll put you in moving pictures."

"I don't want to be in the movies. I want to see some action."

"Okay, lend me some chips and we'll try chuck-a-luck together."

"Get lost. I haven't time for a loser."

She pressed on to join the crowd around Denny and Charlie muttered. "What the hey. Eight to five she's frigid."

A uniformed security cop came up alongside and told him, "I'm sorry, sir. I'll have to ask you to move away from this area."

"Move? For what? This table's not in action!"

"The roulette table is, and you've been annoying a gentleman over there. He says you've been staring at him and making faces and you're throwing him off his game. So why don't you be a nice fellow and move someplace else?"

"The son of a bitch called the cops on me? I'll kill him!"

"Not around me, you won't. You want to move it across the room, or do I throw you out of the club?"

"You think you're big enough?"

"I don't have to be big enough. That's why they issue us these guns and badges."

"Let's not get our shit hot. I'm moving. But the cocksucker never should have called the fuzz down on me!"

As he moved off, a cocktail waitress caught up with him, holding a drink on a silver tray. She asked, "Are you Charlie Waters, sir?"

"Yeah. Anybody ever tell you how much you resemble Kim Novak?"

"Your friend told me to serve you this drink."

"I don't have any friend. I never had any friend. We was too poor."

"You don't want it?"

"I didn't say I wouldn't take the drink. I just said I never had a friend. Why don't we go someplace where I can tell you the sad story of my life?"

"I can't. I'm working."

"So, what time do you get off?"

"I never get off. I just serve cocktails forever

in this silly outfit. I never serve anything else, either, you read me?"

Charlie took the drink while the waitress waited for a tip. When she saw she wasn't going to get any, she shrugged and moved away. Charlie sighed, "Nice ass, too. I can't seem to win at *anything*, tonight."

The waitress worked her way back to where Bill Denny was watching the wheel and whispered, "The man . . . "

"No, that's not what he was," corrected Denny, as the waitress tried to remember what that crazy thing he'd said was.

She brightened and said, "The *midget* with the black cloud hanging over him said to thank you."

Denny nodded, satisfied, and handed her a chip.

The waitress smiled at it and added, "Thank *you*, sir."

But Denny ignored her. The ball had gone into the wrong slot again, and this action was getting cold. He was losing the rhythm of the wheel. It was time to move on.

Denny craned his neck to see if he could spot Charlie in the crowd. Off in the distance, a hand was holding a glass above the pack, as if it were a banner. That would be Charlie, all right. Denny moved in the opposite direction.

Toward the crap table.

22

The dice hit the backboard and came up a five and a four. The bored-sounding stickman called, "Winner nine," and the crowd screamed in delight when one of their own was beating the house.

As Bill Denny edged in on the crap table, a voice in his ear asked, "Going my way?"

"Charlie!"

"Yeah, remember me? I'd like to hang around and chat. But the police are after me."

"It serves you right. I saw you peeking at me from that other table."

"Just protecting my investment. I take it we got took at roulette?"

"No. I won."

"No shit? So how much do we have, now?"

"Twenty-eight thou."

"*Dollars?* That's incredible! That's fourteen thousand for each of us!"

He saw the way Denny was staring at the crap table, and quickly added, "Don't do this to me, baby. Craps are the disease of all games! *Nobody* wins at *craps!*"

He saw he was talking to a stone wall and pleaded, "At least let me have my half, Bill! Jesus! I'll settle for ten grand. I'll settle for five!"

But Denny said, "It's not over yet."

"Well, goddam you, it soon *will* be! Money goes fast in that game, Bill. You can piss away fifty grand before you know it, rolling those nasty little cubes of shit."

"I'm not here to piss it away, Charlie. I'm here to win!"

"You are absolutely out of your gourd! Why don't we call it a night, for Chrissake? Money moves too fast in that game."

"Mine won't."

"What's with this *mine* shit? Half of that stake is mine, Bill."

"Just go along with me for a bit, Charlie. I know what I'm doing."

"Bullshit! You've gone bananas!"

Denny turned away. Charlie grabbed him by the shoulder and swung him around, saying, "Look, I want my end of it, Bill. I want it *now!*"

"Charlie, you can't have it!"

"The hell you say? Who's giving you all the say in this, anyway? Who said you were in charge of all the money in the fucking world?"

"Now look, Charlie. Who asked who to come along?"

"Don't bullshit me, Bill. We're partners! Half that money is *mine*. I want my half, what's all!"

"No. That would break it, see?"

"I'll break it. I'll break your fucking *head!* Come on, I *mean* it, Bill!"

"No," said Denny flatly.

Charlie reddened and gasped. "No? Don't tell me no! I won't *let* you tell me no!"

A security man edged in to ask warily, "What's the problem here?"

"Why don't you butt out!," snapped Charlie.

The security man's eyes narrowed thoughtfully as he said, "Now, look, friend . . ."

Denny cut in, soothingly "It's all right, officer. It's just a friendly argument."

"Well, let's keep it friendly, shall we?" answered the cop, not moving away.

Denny's eyes pleaded with Charlie as he insisted, "We can't break it, Charlie. If I split with you now, it would break this . . . this thing I've got going."

"No it wouldn't, dammit."

Denny chided, "You're acting like a middle-aged virgin. I swear, I hardly recognize you, Charlie. I've never seen you like this."

"You've never seen me *scared!*," snapped Charlie. Then he grinned sheepishly, and added, "You're right. It's not being part of the action. It's not the money. It's hanging around all this action and doing nothing. It's driving me up the wall!"

"Hang on for one game longer. I just want to try this one more game, see?"

"You're gonna get us creamed! You know that, don't you? You *want* to get us creamed!"

"One more and that'll be it. I promise you!"

"Jesus, you don't know what you're asking!"

"Yes I do. Just stay with me one more time.

Win or lose, this is it, Charlie. This is the big one coming up!"

"You're crazy. Crazy and . . . *sick!*"

But he made no further protests as Denny turned to the table.

A loser had just crapped out. Denny nodded at the stickman, who nodded back and said, "Another shooter up."

Denny took the dice and rolled. The stickman said, "Six. Six is the point," and shoved the dice back to him.

Denny blew on the dice and threw them against the backboard. They rolled up six and the stickman said, "Six. We've got ourselves a winner."

Denny's next roll came up crap and the man at his left said, "Don't mean a thing. I'm betting you make it."

But Denny rolled three craps in a row and the man who'd been betting with him muttered, "Hey, change the dice. There's something wrong with them dice!"

The stickman palmed the offending dice without comment and rolled a new pair out on the green felt. Denny doubled his bet on the pass line and rolled. The stickman murmured, "Ten. Ten is the new point."

Somebody said, "Ten's an easy point," and another voice replied, "Bullshit."

Denny rolled two fives, and the stickman said, "Ten, the hard way."

"Now we *go*, crap shooter!," chortled the man who was betting with Denny.

Denny let his bet ride and threw again. The stickman yawned, "Seven," and raked in Denny's chips. The speed at which they vanished hit Denny in the gut as the dice passed to the next shooter.

Charlie pulled Denny partly away from the table and snapped, "Now, listen. Don't say a word. Just listen to me for a change. I can't stand it any longer, Bill. I'm getting physically sick. I'm really about to puke and that's a fact! It's not the money, see? I gotta be part of the action. I'm going insane, plus I'm gonna throw up all over you!"

The stickman called to Denny, "You have the dice, friend."

But Charlie shouted, "In a minute, damn it! This is life or death! I got to bet with you, Bill. I'll make you a deal. If you lose on this next pass, I'll go away and kill myself. I mean, what can it hurt? You're not doing all that hot, anyway. It's not like I'm jinxing a winning streak, see?"

"One pass?"

"I swear to God."

Denny handed Charlie a chip and took the dice. Charlie quickly put his bet on the pass line and said, "Go, baby. I'm too young to die."

Denny rolled a four, and the stickman said, "Four. Four the hard way."

"You can do it!," insisted Charlie. "Throw a fucking four!"

The next roll came up nine. Denny hadn't made his point, but he was still alive on the felt.

As Denny shot again, Charlie's eyes were tightly closed.

The stick man muttered, "Nine, the winner," and Charlie opened his eyes, grinning with disbelief. He slapped Denny on the back and chortled, "Okay, that was a nice warm-up. Now, *take* the motherfuckers!"

Denny rolled two deuces and the stickman said, "Four. Four is the point."

Denny rolled another four and Charlie gasped, "Oh, Sweet Jesus, the drought has broken! I thought you said I was bad luck, you silly son of a bitch!"

"You can stay," said Denny soberly. He seemed to be making up new rules as he went along.

Charlie said, "No. I said one pass and I'm keeping my promise."

"I said it was okay now, Charlie."

"Gosh, I'd like to, but I have so many things to do. I have to set my hair and wash my panties and . . . "

"Charlie, I think you're totally crazy."

"*I'm* crazy? Okay, the hell with my panties. I'll stay."

As the stickman shoved the dice to Denny, he added, "Now that we've made up, show me an eleven, Bill. An eleven is all I'm interested in."

The dice rolled across the board, and Charlie insisted, "I want eleven! I won't *accept* a seven!"

The stickman said, "Winner, seven!," and Charlie laughed, "I'll accept it! I'll accept it. I was faking out the dice with a lie!"

Bill rolled again as Charlie shouted, "Show me the eleven *now!*"

But the stickman said, "Winner, seven!"

A cheer went up and Charlie grinned, saying, "I think I've got a system. Nothing to it. You just have to remember that Dame Fortune is a woman!"

He yelled for another eleven and when Denny rolled a nine, shrugged and said, "Shit, she must have *heard* me!"

Denny tossed a chip to the stickman and said, "On the come." The stickman placed his bet on the come line. Denny placed more chips on the pass line and somebody muttered, "Oh, oh, he's out for blood. I think I'll get in on this!"

Charlie grinned and said, "Five and a four can do! Drop me off on Fifty-Fourth Street, driver!"

Denny rolled another nine and the crowd exploded as the stickman said, "Four five, the winner, nine."

Denny rolled a six. Then tossed another chip to the stickman and said, "Back my first come bet." He tossed another chip and added, "Put this on the come line, too."

"Nine's the point," shrugged the stick man.

Denny rolled, dimly aware of the hush that fell over the table until the stickman said morosely, "And it's nine, the winner."

Somebody shouted, "That's the way to go!," and Charlie started singing "Take it down, Mister Brown."

People were placing bets with him, now. But

Denny ignored the others as he put more chips on the pass line. It was gunfight time at the O.K. Corral as the stickman shoved the dice his way.

Charlie shouted, "Come on, let's see another eleven, Bill. You got me almost feeling sorry for this joint!"

Denny rolled, and the dice landed on five and three. The stickman said, "Eight. The point is eight."

"Eight is just too easy!," laughed Charlie. "Why don't you give him a break and make it the hard way?"

Denny nodded at the stickman and said, "Hard eight, please."

The stickman ran his eyes over the chips that Denny was letting ride and asked, "All of it?"

"All of it. Hard eight."

Eight is the easy point in craps. But eight the hard way has to be two fours. No other way counts. So the stickman felt a little sorry for Denny as the latter rolled. Who did this guy think he was, Howard Hughes? That was a lot of money he was letting ride. But that was how the house paid the electric bill, so . . .

The dice bounced off the backboard and stared up, four and four. The stickman sighed and said, "Winner, eight the hard way. The man is a crap-shooter."

"Is that anything like a starlet?," laughed Charlie.

Denny was laughing, now. His gunfighter's cool dissolving as the warmth of the crowd enfolded

him. Everyone was in love with him now. Nobody loved the house, and Denny was beating the shit out of it. It was as if that last roll had been a shared orgasm and . . . was that what they all were doing here? Was this whole thing a kinky sexual thing?

Denny felt naked in a room full of strangers as he picked up the dice.

Charlie said, "Let's not waste a minute, babe. Kick 'em in the balls with another pass before they can phone the state house for a stay of execution!"

Denny rolled, white-faced, and heard the stickman, as if from a great distance, say, "Eleven, the winner."

Numbly, he rolled again and again heard, "Eleven, the winner." What was the matter with that stickman? Had his record gotten stuck or something?

The crowd was screaming in ecstasy. Charlie shouted, "We're creaming them, Bill! We're gonna wind up owning this fucking town!"

The crowd was chanting in a locomotive rythm, "Show it to me—show it to me—show it to me—show it to me—" as Denny shot. He won and nobody seemed surprised. Other players were joining the chant as they came to the table, and Denny realized the whole room was watching him now. He threw the dice and heard a moan of animal pleasure sweep the casino. The roulette, baccarat, and other tables stood empty as Denny kept winning with a frozen mechanical attitude.

It was too good to be true. It was dreams-come-true time, and he couldn't lose. Couldn't lose and . . . couldn't wake up. This had to be a dream. It couldn't be true. Nobody beat the house, ever!

The house knew this. That was why the house was worried. The crap crew moved over to the table with extra chips and a new pair of dice as this strange, mechanical monster rolled point after point with an eerie sureness.

The stickman said, "Ten. Ten is the point," as he shot a wary glance at one of the owners. The owner nodded and the game went on. And then the tourist got to the table.

She was a nice young woman, whose only crime was that she didn't know. She'd just come to Reno with her husband, and the casino was a lot of fun. She pressed forward through the crowd, trying to see what was going on, and nobody'd ever told her that one does not, ever, put a human hand on a crap table.

Denny shot as the girl tourist, losing her balance, threw a hand forward to steady herself. The felt was dry to the touch and the dice tickled as they rolled across the back of her hand. The stickman shouted, "Seven, craps!," and it looked like all these people were getting ready to lynch her. Had she done something wrong?

As the stickman started to rake in the chips, a howl of protest went up. A woman raked her nails at the frightened girl tourist and screamed, "Dead dice! Dead dice! That was not a legal throw!"

Others took up the shout, yelling, "The dice were touched in motion! That roll didn't count!"

The tourist girl scurried away as an angry voice said, "I'll bet she was working with the house. We ought to string her up!"

"Yeah," a woman shouted, "this guy was winning before they sent her in to screw him!"

One of the owners worked his way to the stickman and held up a hand, shouting, "Take it easy. All bets are off on that last throw!"

"That's more *like* it," said the woman as the stickman shoved the dice back to Denny.

"Want to try it again?" the stickman asked.

But Denny was staring blankly at the table, wondering what he was doing there. He suddenly turned and walked away, leaving his chips on the table. Charlie quickly picked them up and went after him with a puzzled frown.

One of the pit bosses asked, "Want a bag for those chips?"

But Charlie snapped, "I got 'em, I got 'em. Hey, babe, wait for Zapata!"

He caught up with Denny and asked, "Hey, what's the matter?"

Denny just shrugged.

"Are you all right, Bill?"

Denny nodded.

Charlie said, "Jesus, you look green around the gills. You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. You'd better cash in those chips, Charlie."

"You walked away from them. I couldn't be-

lieve it. You just stopped, like somebody pulled your switch, and walked the fuck away!"

"I just . . . woke up."

"Yeah, well I still think I'm dreaming. Why don't you just set and rest a while and . . . "

"Cash in the chips, Charlie. It's all over. It's all over, and I'm awfully tired."

Denny sank down in a lounge chair and Charlie stared down at him, confused. He licked his lips and said, "Hey, guy, we *won!*"

"Did we?"

"You bet your sweet bippy we did. You know how much we got here? There must be thousands and thousands. I've never won anything like this in my life, Bill!"

"Why don't you cash them in, then. I just have to sit for a while, Charlie. I don't want to talk, see?"

"Hey, Bill, are you *crying*, for God's sake? What's the matter? That time of the month or something?"

Denny didn't answer.

23

Charlie took the chips to the cashier, who gleeped at the size of his winnings and signaled for a supervisor. The supervisor looked over the winnings and muttered, "We'd better settle up behind closed doors. Come on. I'll get a security man and open the safe."

Charlie followed, stealing a glance across the room at Bill Denny. Denny was slumped in his chair, crying openly now. Had the poor guy flipped out completely?

People were staring at him as they passed. But Denny didn't seem to care. He didn't seem to know they were there. He was all alone in his private hell.

"Dames," muttered Charlie, following the supervisor to the office to pick up their winnings.

"He rejoined Denny singing, "There'll be a change in the weather, a change in the scene, from now on, there'll be an eighty-two thousand dollar change in me! Eighty-two thousand, and the creeps tried to give me a check. I insisted on cash and, look at me, Bill. June is busting

out all over. I've got dollar bills stuffed in every pocket. I thought they'd have to stuff the last couple of hundred up my nose!"

Denny didn't answer, and Charlie asked, "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing."

"Nothing? Man, we *won!* I am going to stuff thousands of dollars up your nose and you'll feel ever so much better!"

As Denny sat there, limp and unresisting, Charlie proceeded to shove money in his pockets, "There you are, William my son, forty-one biggies. Not dollars, not hundreds, but thousands, *thousands!*"

Denny didn't answer. Charlie stared down with a puzzled frown and said, "What's the *matter* with you? We just split an eighty-two-thousand-dollar wishbone!"

"Be careful what you wish for," sighed Denny, "you just might *get* it!"

"You didn't want to win, for Chrissake?"

"I wanted to, Charlie. I wanted to so bad I fucked up my whole life."

"So, now that you've won?"

"It wasn't worth it."

Charlie nodded in dawning understanding and said, "I balled a movie star, one time. Met her down in Acapulco where she was shooting a picture. I mean, she was really a big Hollywood sex queen, see? I'd tell you her name, but you'd

say I was full of shit. Anyway, I guess I hit her when she was in the mood or something, and we wound up in the feathers. Me and this snazzy-zazzie from the land of never-never."

"And she wasn't any good?"

"Oh, she was good, all right. She looked even better off camera and out of her clothes than I'd expected. And she moved her ass like a saloon door on payday. But that was just the trouble, Bill. I mean, for Chrissake, she was a *movie star!*"

"So?"

"So she screwed just like any other dame. I mean, a guy expects a little *more* from a *movie star!* I remember thinking, even while I was banging her, 'Is this all there is? Is this what all those millions of guys are jerking off about?' You know what I mean?"

"Yeah, Charlie. I know what you mean."

"Well, look, why don't you just sit here and get your head together? I'm going back for some more action."

"Don't go, Charlie."

"Whadaya mean, don't go? I haven't had a dime to bet all evening and we are *hot,* tonight!"

"We're not hot, Charlie. We've never been hot."

"Come on, what happened to that special feeling, Bill?"

"There never was a special feeling. I just cracked up. I just went *completely* out of my mind!"

"Hey, come on. You said you knew you'd win, and dammit, you did! It's still there, Bill. I can tell. I can feel it clinging to my bones!"

Denny shook his head and said, "It was all a fluke. I just faked us out with that bullshit about a special feeling."

"Well, you must have felt *something*."

"I didn't. I just cracked wide open and went bananas. I convinced myself, and even you, that I knew what I was doing. But I didn't, Charlie. I was just sick. Terribly sick."

"So now you're cured?"

"I don't know. I don't know what I am. I just know I've been sick. Maybe that's the start of a cure."

"Yeah, well that money's going to help, old buddy. That money means you've got the books and loan sharks off your back. That money means you're ahead of the game, baby!"

Denny shrugged and asked, "Does it? I've been throwing my life away for five years, Charlie. At forty-one thousand, that means I just made a little over eight thousand a year for all those miserable days and sleepless nights. That's less than half what an established writer ought to be making, Charlie. The office boy where I used to work takes home close to eight thousand a year!"

Charlie shook his head and muttered, "Boy, you sure are a *cheerful* son of a bitch! I'm gonna

try another shot at the crap table. You safe to leave along with all that introspection?"

Denny didn't answer.

Charlie shrugged and walked over to a crap table. He had all the money in the fucking world and the night was young. A pretty girl with dark shadows under her eyes was shooting. Charlie smiled at the stickman and said, "A hundred she makes it," and placed a bill on the come line.

The stickman said, "You'll have to buy some chips, sir. House rules against cash on the table."

Charlie headed for the cashier's window to purchase some chips. He became aware he was not alone, as Denny said, "Charlie, I've got to talk to you."

"Let go of my arm, will you? I heard about your new insights into the meaning of the universe, old buddy. The whole thing figures eight to five to run down into a black hole in a couple of zillion years. Meanwhile, I got me a live one at the crap table and she looks like she could use a friend."

"I gotta go, Charlie. It's over. I've had it."

"Yeah, well I haven't. Not to worry, Bill. I've got it under control, see? I figure to keep half of it in cash and quit as soon as I've blown twenty or so. You know me, Bill. I never lose *all* of it."

"Come back to L.A. with me, Charlie. Come back while you're still a winner."

"Look, you just got through telling me you were *crazy*, Bill! I'm on to a shooter over there who's due to hit, and, even if she craps out, she figures to be a good lay. I mean, I'm not going *anywhere*, William my son!"

Bill Denny watched him as he went back to join the others at the crap table. He trailed uncertainly, wondering why the others were so excited. What was there to be so excited about? A faded girl, rolling small plastic cubes on a worn green-felt surface. What did it really *matter* if she rolled craps or a string of seven elevens? What were all these people *doing* here?

He had to have some air. The air in here was tainted with sweat and perfume, fear and . . . semen?

Bill Denny headed for the front entrance, his steps taking on a new confidence as he folded away the money that seemed to be stuffed inside his shirt and up his sleeves. A ten-dollar bill fell, uncounted, to the carpet, and a well-dressed man dropped to one knee and hastily snatched it up in a fear-damp fist.

Denny walked outside and stood on the cool cement, breathing the clean air from the desert hills. He looked around for a cab and, not seeing any, wondered if he ought to make a call from that nearby phone booth.

Then a pair of headlights swung his way from the highway, and he could see it was a taxi from

the airport. He decided to forget about the phone call. It was too early for a phone call. Maybe later . . . after he'd shown her he could live a normal life.

The taxi stopped in front of the glittering entrance, disgorging a pair of excited young men. Charlie had followed Denny out the entrance and was just standing there, bemused, as one of the men waved and said, "We're here for action, buddy. How does it look?"

Denny didn't answer. But Charlie chortled back, "Hot. Ready to be taken. How much did you bring?"

One of the men grinned and said, "We've scraped together close to a thou!"

"Wow!," said Charlie. "With a thousand dollars, how can you miss?"

Denny waved to the driver and started over to the taxi. But Charlie took his arm and said, "I was only kidding. You're really goin' home, huh?"

"Yes, Charlie. I'm going home."

"Maybe that's the best for you, then. Take care of yourself, baby!"

"Look, Charlie, we'll keep in touch, huh?"

"Sure, sure, maybe I'll write a book someday."

Denny got in the cab and rolled down the window, saying, "Take care of yourself, Charlie."

Charlie made a victory sign and told the driver, "Take this guy to the airport before we blubber all over one another, huh?"

As Bill Denny's taxi pulled away, Charlie

Waters turned to one of the young men who'd just arrived and said, "Well, amigo. There's a crap table just waiting to be took. But remember, the dishwater blonde with the faded gardenia in her hair is mine."

As the two new players headed inside, he hurried after them, calling, "Hey, wait for Zapata!"

"I'VE NEVER WON BIG, CHARLIE. NOW I'M GOING TO WIN, I TELL YOU. I'M GOING TO WIN."

CALIFORNIA $PLIT

Bill Denny didn't like to gamble. He **had** to gamble. So far he'd lost his wife, his job, and his last cent. It might have been the end if he hadn't met Charlie. Charlie loved gambling. But he loved his fun, too. Booze, broads, and gambling in that order.

This is what he was teaching Bill Denny, when Bill got caught up in the biggest, most dangerous game of his life...

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